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an issue on histories  
and historiographies



# HISTORY, PERFORMANCE, COUNTER-CINEMA

A STUDY OF  
'DIE PATRIOTIN'  
BY JOHN O'KANE



*Die Patriotin*: History teacher Gabi Teichert tries to understand the past.

*... only a genuine philosophy of history is capable of respecting the specificity and radical difference of the social and cultural past while disclosing the solidarity of its polemics and passions, its forms, structures, experiences, and struggles, with those of the present day.*<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 1981, p 18.

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<sup>2</sup> Hayden White, 'Getting Out of History', *Diacritics*, vol 12 no 3, 1982, p 5.

*The difficulty with the notion of a truth of **past** experience is that it can **no longer** be experienced, and this throws a specifically **historical** knowledge open to the charge that it is a **construction** as much of the imagination as of thought and that its authority is no greater than the power of the historian to **persuade** his readers that his account is true. This puts historical discourse on the same level as any rhetorical performance and consigns it to the status of a textualization neither more nor less authoritative than 'literature' itself can lay claim to.*<sup>2</sup>

THE PROBLEMS SURROUNDING a 'nostalgic rewriting' of the events of the past acquire a certain strategic importance in the early '80s as we witness a variety of reappraisals of even very recent times. The reassessment of the '60s left in terms of its alleged exclusion of a properly feminist consciousness (especially evident in the *Neue Subjectivität* movement in West Germany); the 'unearthing' of popular labour movements previously ignored in traditional histories (E P Thompson's work in Britain); and the recent efforts in France to redefine the concept of the resistance as it related to the Nazi occupation (the debate in *Cahiers du Cinéma*, and filtered into *Screen*, surrounding Louis Malle's *Lacombe Lucien*), attest to a need, perhaps endemic to the uncertainty of the age, to revise the 'lessons of history'. The political implications of such revisions are initially positive: the more voices resuscitated from the ruins of the past, the greater potential articulation of its significance.

Yet, as the controversy surrounding Malle's rewriting suggests, the status of this revival of additional voices, though a welcome necessity in and of itself, is greatly dependent upon whether such attempted interventions are motivated by the desire to supersede other histories or rather to reinforce them constructively as part of a strategy for gauging the work's conditions of existence. For Benjamin, the articulation of the past meant to 'seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger'.<sup>3</sup> This danger, however, may be double-edged: the present (and 'dangerous') provocation finally welded to that event in the past in a meaningful constellation for the current era, may be the result of an over-determination of forces that produces a picture that is far from one of 'scientific' accuracy. The sense of the past associated with such a discursive moment, especially in times of transition and rapid social change, may not be able to be 'wrested' away from that always immanent 'conformism' to the 'forces of reaction'. This discursive present may conspire with the non-discursive past in such a way that History becomes a real and tangible entity which can be successfully recapitulated, discovered, and finally even distorted, the past then attaining a certain principle of validity in itself where the restoration of forgotten agents into history is an act which restores the 'truth' to historical discourse. That is, this double transformation, from history to memory and from memory to history, depicts mutual validation:

*... the past informs and underwrites the validity of the present, and the writings on the past are guaranteed by their very involvement with the past. The past is history, and the writing of history is thus endowed with an autonomous effectivity. History not only exists, it is truth: the truth of past experience, and the truth of present historical accounts of it. To learn lessons from the past, it is necessary only to unlock this truth.*<sup>4</sup>

In the following essay I will explore this space between memory on the one hand, and history (or past events) on the other, the forces mediating a particular historical conjuncture (the late '70s in West Germany). *Die Patriotin* (*The Patriot*, directed by Alexander Kluge, W Germany, 1979)

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<sup>3</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', *Illuminations*, New York, Schocken Books, 1977.

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<sup>4</sup> Keith Tribe, 'History and the Production of Memory', *Screen* Winter 1977/78, vol 18 no 4, p 11. For a discussion of the general theoretical problems involved in conceptualising history, especially as it pertains to film and popular culture, see pp 9-13.

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<sup>5</sup> David Carroll, 'The Alterity of Discourse: Form, History, and the Question of the Political in M M Bakhtin', *Diacritics*, vol 13 no 2, 1983, p 83. See also Gregory Ulmer, 'The Object of Post-Criticism' in Hal Foster (ed), *The Anti-Aesthetic*, Port Townsend, Bay Press, 1983.

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<sup>6</sup> As Tribe argues, op cit, p 12, whereas the object of the new working class and women's history was above all a political one (to strengthen the movements within which they appeared by giving political demands a historical validity), the 'conditions for such work being effective are not however universal, and it cannot be supposed that to work on popular history is of itself politically progressive. In fact it can be argued that in certain cases such work could be at present diversionary.'

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is a particularly appropriate subject for examining this critical space since it incorporates a political awareness of the implications surrounding such rewritings, a sensitivity to the potentially exclusionary stature of polemical discourses or ambitions that desires to maintain an alternative or interventive stance as well. My concern will be with the way this film breaks the circuit of self-evidence between memory and history to assert a new 'truth' about the past, one that secures a knowledge of the object of investigation through (a renewed process of) *understanding* or *intuition* and not through conceptualisation or causal explanation. Such a performative reaction to mimetic expression (common in Syberberg's filmed theatre as well) justifies *Die Patriotin* as primarily a work of mourning where the urge to realise truth claims within a totalising, rational critique can only retain, as it did with Nietzsche, the rhetorical claim of the aesthetic fragment.

Yet this search for a new sort of truth about Germany's past, and its determining impact upon the nature of contemporary social and political issues, may prove more problematic than enlightening. What is the political status of historical argument where there is a desire to make an overarching statement about the cultural context of contemporary Germany that intersects with a 'post-critical', 'counter-exclusionary' gesture, one that merely demystifies, consistent with such rhetorical claims, other discourses and practices associated with various ideologies? Is Kluge arguing with Bakhtin against servitude to any political, historical, aesthetic or formalist metanarrative, any one particular language, discursive practice or critical strategy (especially that of the power of one narrator or master-theorist)?<sup>5</sup> Given his avowed leftist aim, can he actually be resisting all proposed negations, resolutions, or dialectical syntheses of diversity that we associate with the tenets of dialectical materialism (especially the notion of an inevitable diachronic transformation of the class struggle)? Finally, what ideology can be associated with Kluge's historical discourse?

Such questions of course force us to rethink the very basis upon which a 'counter-cinema' rests, and specifically the effectiveness of practices identified with it in rewriting history. In the following, assuming that work on popular history is not in and of itself 'politically progressive', I will discuss the effectivity of Kluge's film, the political objectives of his investigation as well as the framework(s) made use of for interpreting the present and past.<sup>6</sup> This will involve attention to Kluge's place within and modification to the conventions of a counter-cinema, especially the ways in which the forms of a postmodern avant-garde lend themselves to a rewriting through the mode of film specifically. Drawing from these assertions, I will discuss how the text of *Die Patriotin* performs an intervention by discrediting historicist, humanist and idealist historical discourses.

## II

Kluge's design for breaking free from these ideological discourses on history acknowledges that history is not simply a substance which is available in an unproblematical form for our own inspection and analysis, its very form becoming an issue in its own right.<sup>7</sup> If the absent structuring force which is history can only come to us through its prior (re)textualisation, then the profusion of cultural forms and models from the factories of advanced consumer society that typifies the contemporary sensibility renders this truthful recovery of the past even more suspect and problematic. The important point then becomes one of how to turn this relativism around; how to use this cultural fragmentation to construct an adversarial practice (admitting here that this whole notion may be in transition in current times). Kluge is surely aware of the need to demystify the false myths about the past that are given legitimacy through this hyperinflation of forms and models, yet he is hopeful also that the acquisition of this historical knowledge can finally be fed back into the language of politics and foment constructive change. This constitutes a noticeable departure from the assumptions and practices of what we know as the avant-garde where the circuit between politics and historical knowledge was perceived quite differently. History was viewed as an unfortunate fetter to be superseded by a deliberate application of the tenets of modernisation: the belief in unlimited progress that projected some kind of telos into the future. This privileging of the present moment as the locus of intervention in a critical gesture to efface tradition (the perpetual reification of the new)<sup>8</sup>, was credible in times that could offer some measure of narrative truth (leftist radicalism in the '60s, for example, having a fairly broad consensual basis). The place of history in Kluge's era is to support the reconstitution of the conditions which can explain such surface phenomena as tendentious orientation, and especially such quickly disappearing consensual bases attending the recent depoliticising of society. Kluge's recovered history is then the discontinuity and contradiction that actually orchestrates the phenomenal unities of idealism and empiricism.

The test series of events which demonstrates this examination of surface occur in what has been called the apocalyptic Fall of 1977, when a succession of terrorist actions around the abduction of Hans-Martin Schleyer unsettled the calm of everyday West German life.<sup>9</sup> These forced a renewed attention to the heritage of Fascism in Germany, specifically the belief that its effects were continuing into the current times. This occurs in tandem with a look back to the conditions of the leftist movement of the late '60s, a nostalgic re-examination of its assumptions and failures. As the documentary *Deutschland im Herbst* (Germany in Autumn)—a co-operative product made in October 1977 to which Kluge contributed one episode—attests, the 'lost opportunity' to intervene in these earlier years is believed to have a bearing upon the nature of the amnesia accruing during the subsequent decade. The sudden urge to

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<sup>7</sup> S P Mohanty, 'History at the Edge of Discourse: Marxism, Culture, Interpretation', *Diacritics*, vol 12 no 3, 1982, p 38. See also Philip Rosen, 'Securing the Historical: Historiography and the Classical Cinema', in Patricia Mellencamp and Philip Rosen (eds) *Cinema Histories, Cinema Practices*, Los Angeles, The American Film Institute, 1984, p 18.

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<sup>8</sup> See Kenneth Frampton, 'Towards a Critical Regionalism', in Hal Foster (ed), op cit, p 27.

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<sup>9</sup> The following events specific to '77 initiated a 'rewriting' of contemporary German history: the abduction of Hanns-Martin Schleyer, magnate of the Benz corporation, by the Red Army Faction in early Fall; the hijacking of a Lufthansa plane and its subsequent recapturing by a special unit at Mogadishu around mid-October; the simultaneous discovery of the alleged suicides of Baader, Ensslin, and Raspe in the top security prison of Stuttgart-Stammheim (these being the terrorists whose release had been demanded in relation to these actions); and the discovery the next day of Schleyer's body in a car across the border near Mulhouse. For a discussion of these events as they pertained to the making of *Deutschland im Herbst*, see Miriam Hansen, 'Cooperative Auteur Cinema and Oppositional Public Sphere', in *New German Critique*, no 24-25, pp 43-45.

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<sup>10</sup> Kluge's ideas pertaining to the mechanism of film approximate to those of Metz and Baudry in the belief in its inherently regressive tendencies (reflecting the postwar pessimism of the Frankfurt School, toward popular culture?), its capacity to 'breed an attitude of acquiescence' in the mind of the spectator, similar to Baudry's 'subject-effect' (Alexander Kluge, 'The Fundamental Interest of the Documentary Film', *Wide Angle*, vol 3 no 4, pp 27-8). He invokes the critical attack typified by Brecht against 'classic realism' where the self-evidence of surface images is unaccompanied by techniques exposing the context (Alexander Kluge, 'On Film and the Public Sphere', *New German Critique*, no 24-25, p 218).

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<sup>11</sup> See 'History/Production/Memory', *Edinburgh Magazine*, 1977.

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remember nearly becomes a national pastime itself, and thus it is no mystery that the film-makers comprising the '60s movement in West Germany are particularly obsessed with this phenomenon. The terms for successfully moving forward in time are now defined with attention to these 'facts' from the past. The impetus becomes the long-term reprogramming of popular memory, an attempted reorientation of perceptual processes that encourages viewers to re-examine the many narratives presented through the years by the 'culture industry' without being given a strictly didactic choice between true and false. Most important is the effort to avoid any totalising gesture in this presentation, any 'expressive totality' which closes off truth into a synthetic unity that tends to be either accepted or rejected by audiences. The effectivity of the collaged fragment perpetually engages the capacities of contemporary viewers to counter their programming through popular media (the result of which represses a more complex narrative about our socio-historical grounding). Kluge's timely and selective offering of fragments of history to depoliticised viewers can therefore stimulate a kind of reprogramming that is motivated toward certain ends (the remembering of the past and the repoliticising of the populace) while remaining resistant to synthesis, open to the insertion of ever new individual consumers into the recombination of fragments.<sup>10</sup>

Kluge's strategy can then be seen as acknowledging what studies on classic cinema and historiography have told us, namely this mode's tendency to distort the social context and engender forgetfulness (though having the power to evoke immediacy, the evocation privileges the actual, immediate to the detriment of the future and the past). He concurs with recent work on film and popular memory regarding the degree to which 'memory' (or some reasonably accurate constellation of past events) is actually realisable on or within such a filmic mode.<sup>11</sup> With this narrative mode there is the tendency for the significance of a past to be inscribed in the heroes it proverbially and inevitably constructs: the attempt to realise a history rapidly regresses into a humanism as its support in which the person is the bearer of the history, the visible agent of historicity in whose actions are inscribed the truth of a past. That is, the coming together of historicism and humanism in dominant cinema produces two main negative effects: the construction of narrative in such a way that the historicity of events closely rests on the faithful representation of the agents of this history (and whose viewpoint, consistent with classic cinema, we are destined to assume); and the self-evident (consistent with historicism) primacy of visual imagery that blocks efforts to achieve a complexity of historical knowledge.

The notion of an 'effective history' (from Foucault via Nietzsche) may most closely define Kluge's 'performance', a use of history that severs its connections to memory as conventionally construed, its metaphysical and anthropological model(s), and constructs a 'counter-memory'—a transformation of history into a totally different form of time; a use of history where there is a dissociation of identity and identifications, a making visible of all the heterogeneous systems or discontinuities which

are masked by the self (and inhibit the formation of any form of identity); a use of history where there is an acknowledgement or acceptance that the will to knowledge will not achieve a state of universal truth.<sup>12</sup> Kluge's cinematic realisation of this counter-memory asserts through example, illustrates, the following correctives: the debunking of subjective agency through a complex, multi-levelled narration; a demystification of the objective material of and from history through its framing with an exhaustive series of styles and media that draw attention to the very act of discovery on the part of the subject; an intermixing of fiction and documentary that further problematises subjective and objective categories; a fragmentation of narrative into a series of personal dramas or dramatisations through montage, whose final interconnection is meant to offer the possibility of a larger socio-historical context within which these personal dramas (the raw material of narrative, popular cinema) are positioned<sup>13</sup>; and a movement back and forth in time as if past events still possessed some pre-emptive power for and in the present moment of 1979.

### III

Foucault states that an effective history inverts the relationship that traditional history, in its dependence on metaphysics, asserts between proximity and distance. This latter history is concerned with a reflection upon distances and heights, the 'noblest periods' and the 'highest forms', the most 'abstract ideas' and the 'purest' individualities, and preserves this perspective by 'getting as near as possible'. The former 'shortens its vision to those things nearest to it', 'unearthing' periods of seemingly minor importance that are usually relegated to the periphery. The discovery of 'lofty epochs' provokes a suspicion, and in 'looking down' it apprehends the various perspectives in a way that discloses 'dispersion and difference' so that things are left 'undisturbed in their own dimensions and intensity'. Effective history examines 'what is closest, but in an abrupt dispossession, so as to seize it at a distance'.<sup>14</sup>

This may be considered an epigraph to Gabi Teichert's 'dispossession' of the 'truths' feeding the post-'77 cultural and political malaise in West Germany. Familiar as the heroine from *Deutschland im Herbst*, engaged in a similar excavation of the German past, Teichert is the focal point whose consciousness is decentred in a performance that sets forgetting and remembering against one another. She is the designated person, the subject, as a history teacher, driven to question the decision by the State of Hessen in 1978 to abolish the study of history as an entity in itself. Her response indexes the distance traversed since October 1977 when the activist urge rose briefly to the surface. As this impulse becomes less urgent, and as history comes to have less importance (the past becoming repressed in the contemporary mind), Kluge presents her in the role of an ironic storyteller trying to make sense of this growing insignificance. The act of storytelling itself is foregrounded and history unfolds as just

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<sup>12</sup> Michel Foucault, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History', in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1977, pp 160-63.

<sup>13</sup> 'If I conceive of realism as the knowledge of relationships, then I must provide a trope for what cannot be shown in the film, for what the camera cannot record. This trope consists in the contrast between two shots which is only another way of saying montage.' (Alexander Kluge, *New German Critique*, op cit, pp 218-19).

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<sup>14</sup> Michel Foucault, op cit, pp 155-56.

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<sup>15</sup> The film is divided, in a fashion reminiscent of Syberberg, into a series of 'Brechtian' tableaux, but done so in a very disorderly and inconsistent way as if to announce the application of Brecht's own maxim to make use of forms while changing them.

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one more story. Official personas from the SPD (the West German Social Democratic Party) espouse a narrative which is clearly a fallible one, provoking Gabi Teichert's disillusionment about being able to effect this conventional political process. The unproblematical presentation of great events through the guise of a great individual (what make up the newsreel narratives of Western societies) is spliced together with material comprising the 'other' history, that expunged from the official centre of public life.

The first tableau of the film<sup>15</sup>, entitled 'The Knee', is an excursus on such a displacement, establishing a contextual history normally absent from official proclamations. No significant personas are designated, and no great and recognisable events are alluded to, only shots of unknown soldiers fallen in battle (connoted mournfully through the accompanying music and soft focus) without the accompaniment of coherence within a particular time and place (an indispensable requisite of official histories). Much of the early footage is non-narrative (in the sense of foregoing a tendency to resolution) and works on the viewer emotionally, suggesting, consistent with the elegiac mode, a sense of absence or loss. The pannings of these dead soldiers, who are evocative of a certain pre-industrialised military conflict, are accomplished through the assistance of soft focus in a paucity of light, creating a sensation of viewing something never seen before (the unconscious force of history that can't be repressed?), an accentuation of the voyeuristic glance through the key-hole of cinema to history through cinema. The camera wanders among the pre-urban landscape of a past Germany, the silence and patient deliberation of the framing starkly contrasting with subsequent portraits of Frankfurt and its skyline (a prototype of the standardised 'international style') as a frenzied condensation of experience (the advancing of the frame to create the sense of time passing quickly). We get shots (all varieties of framing: close-ups, long shots, deep focus, montage, pans, etc, as if to approach some sort of non-manipulative multi-perspectivism) of trees, bushes, flowers and a castle, evocative of a feudal atmosphere existing prior to the rise of the bourgeoisie (back to the land and peasants, one of the explosive preconditions of Fascism?). The narrator (voice-over by Kluge) informs us that as a German knee (that is, peripheral to the mind and therefore capable of seeing differently) he is necessarily interested in emperors, peasants, plants, meadows, farms and gardens, the mythified past that has to be apprehended in connection (the knee being actually the joint, the space between the lower and upper parts) with crises indigenous to the present moment of dismay.

This attention to the partial and peripheral as a way to assess provisionally the complete and 'self-evident', is integral to the narration. As the voice-over acknowledges in the first tableau, had his knee (that of Corporal Wieland, who was shot down on January 29, 1943, north of Stalingrad) been allowed to be part of something bigger, had Corporal Wieland not been killed in World War II, then this persona itself would be part of something bigger, i.e. the Germany of today. The implication is clear that the content of what is being narrated, the banal and trivial



episodes previously denied expression, constitute a kind of absent structuring force that, in post-'67 Germany, returns as the repressed, an unconscious of history. No true, substitute, history is offered through this narration, only a structural realignment of the terms of the equation necessary to approach 'decideability': the many brief allusions throughout to events in the past, and the trivial instances themselves, work together as a suggestive check upon official dicta. Again, in the post-critical style, there is no thematic intervention predisposing a causal explanation or interconnection. The referent, the common denominator, is simply the existence of all Germany's dead as a pre-discursive reality (the relevance of Jameson's statement that history is what hurts?). Hence the significance of the narrator's first utterance: the fact that Gabi Teichert has an interest in all of Germany's dead means essentially that she is a patriot. In this new configuration of terms a patriot cannot be directly involved in and supportive of the government in and of itself, but can only search for new ways to interrelate this lack (of positive material expression). As a displacement of mind, the narrating knee, the voice for the other, functions to suspend or check the urge of the rational, dialecticising mind to explain coherently or synthesise this material into a self-evident centrepiece. Therefore the inherent antagonism between this knee disclaiming authority for itself and Gabi Teichert, the occasional subject of the knee's/Kluge's voice, who is shown in constant need to understand, to explain and synthesise (in one scene she burrows in the earth for the key to German history; this is quickly countered by her astronomical glance at stars and bodies in space). Kluge's pronouncements through the knee evoke a similar distancing or stasis: he refutes early the suggestion that a knee can't speak (saying that when we're dead we are not simply dead, but remain full of protest), but then acknowledges that it might not make sense.

Kluge's historical placement as a leftist theorist in an age of retrenchment and repression, depicting an epoch unable to apprehend a totality, a universal language of expression, suggests that this sense-making activity we are witnessing is closely related to a kind of crisis in narrative authority where the desire to interconnect events and occurrences within a moralising, coherent discourse, what is usually associated with the impulse to narrate, exists in tension with the performative dissolution of a previously legitimate social and legal system. We certainly expect a reluctant claim to authority in such a self-questioning conjuncture as I've described above: a Germany searching for a renewed legality. If we accept Hayden White's assertion (drawn through Hegel's belief in an intimate relation between law, historicity, and narrativity) that narrative in general has to do with these topics of law, legality and legitimacy, the self-reflexivity of the film's sense-making narrational persona can therefore be viewed as a type of history writing which offers multiple testimony in support for competing moral perspectives against one univocal position: 'The more historically self-conscious the writer of any form of historiography, the more the question of the social system and the law which sustains it, the authority of this law and its justification,

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<sup>16</sup> Hayden White, 'The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality', *Critical Inquiry*, Autumn 1980, vol 7 no 1, p 17.

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<sup>17</sup> *ibid*, pp 17-18.

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<sup>18</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'The Storyteller', in *Illuminations*, New York, Schocken Books, 1979.

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<sup>19</sup> Wlad Godzich, 'After the Storyteller...', Foreword to Ross Chambers, *Story and Situation: Narrative Seduction and the Power of Fiction*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1984, p xviii.

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and threats to the law occupy his attention.<sup>16</sup>

How then is this seeming contradiction reconciled? If all stories (at least the 'fully realised' ones, to borrow Hayden White's phrase) are allegorical in designating a moral, in endowing events imagined or real with an importance they don't have as simple sequential arrangement, then every historical narrative has as its latent or manifest purpose as well the desire to *moralise* the events of which it treats.<sup>17</sup> Yet Kluge's re-writing, clearly an 'incompletely realised' story, would seem to place us on another stage in the evolution of modes of historical representation in the sense that it appears merely to displace this moralising/demystification opposition onto a different level of concern: the storytelling function itself and its capacity to elicit a new moral orientation, and perhaps intervention, on the part of the receivers of the work. That is, given the ambivalence regarding the status of the West German social and legal system, the (back)ground on or against which any closure of a story one might wish to tell about a past is absent. This suggests the need to foreground the social function of the storyteller as a way of proposing a new vital relation between sense-making, moral relevance and construction, and multiple options drawn from a complexity of socio-historical knowledge.

The foregrounding of the social function of the storyteller in this post-modern world of a profusion of forms *is* storytelling, that reframing of prior modes of expression discussed earlier. Film can surely be seen as the new (postmodern) storyteller, where nearly all vestiges of author(ity) are eliminated in announcing the function of (the) story as self-evident artifact of mass production whose significance varies according to the conditions governing their insertion into particular contexts or situations. That is, we might say that Walter Benjamin's observations in his seminal essay 'The Storyteller' became part of the content of *Die Patriotin*, matter from the past to be framed and modified in and for the present. The distinction between experience and mere information drawn in this essay<sup>18</sup> retains a certain validity for Kluge, but its efficacy is grounded not in the lived experience of the teller but in ours as perceivers and consumers of an object-as-story that has come to assume an ever greater authority in and of itself.<sup>19</sup>

The expansion of market society predisposed, for Benjamin, the devaluation of experience in preparation for a type of knowledge acquisition based on mediation through books and the application of models. The 'secular productive forces of history' associated with this expansion 'gradually removed narrative from the realm of living speech' and forced its alignment with the novel, a type of discourse commensurate with solitary reading formations (the privatisation of life running concomitant with the commercialisation wrought by the Enlightenment). Whereas the storyteller 'takes what he tells from experience', and subsequently 'makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale', the isolated novelist 'cannot counsel others' since the form of the novel does not instruct (even when efforts have been made to implant instruction, Benjamin argues, these attempts have merely amounted to a modifica-

tion in the novel form), but carries the 'incommensurable to extremes in the representation of human life', merely 'gives evidence of the profound perplexity of the living'. Succumbing to a kind of cult of information of the age of the reified commodity, the novel fails to produce *wisdom*, a term for Benjamin that seems to personify all the richness of a 'writerly', open-ended text. A 'real story' contains wisdom since it approximates a 'proverb or maxim' in being useful and moral; it remains ambiguous in warding off the 'claim to prompt verifiability' that is characteristic of 'information' (the latter comes to us 'already shot through with explanation', self-obviousness). Most significantly, the 'psychological connection of the events is not forced on the reader. It is left up to him to interpret things the way he understands them, and thus the narrative achieves an amplitude that information lacks.'<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'The Storyteller', *op cit*, pp 86-91.

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#### IV

Kluge's postmodern storytelling nostalgically looks back to and probes the time of this narrative amplitude (its conditions of existence), along with examining the conditions permitting the 'modern' mediation of desire, the phenomena that work against the expression of such an amplitude in favour of closure; information devoid of experience. Consistent with the qualified opposition to historicism and empiricism I have set forth above, the suggestion here is not that we should go back and discover a true form of storytelling in all its glaring, self-evident unity. It seems to be rather that the loss of authority and ability to achieve closure exemplifies that a metanarrative can't be stated or attained; and that until such a condition of consensual wisdom returns, if ever, the vast profusion of narratives or stories that constitute the history of Germany should be permitted to speak for themselves. In fact, it would seem that a historically self-conscious modification to the montage/collage form is the most (and perhaps only) viable means in a transitional era that is experiencing the anxious influence of so many tested expressions and outworn ideologies. This form is continuous with the cinematic heritage of leftist radicalism in Europe, that which first witnessed attempts to use popular expression within an 'avant-garde' structure (thus constituting an implicit historicising of its own status), yet Kluge's variant doesn't compromise itself—there being no apparent symptomatic guilt—as the intellectual, *avant-garde*, theoretical intervention it indeed is (lacking the pretension to be an avowedly political intervention). And the effects of this self-conscious, implicit historicising of his form result in forcing attention to the context, to the interventive patterns that constantly redefine the epistemological significance of narrative or story throughout history.

One could say, then, that Kluge's constructive (rather than merely demystifying) response in *Die Patriotin* to explanations of the past which tend toward a metanarrative definition of the search for national identity in the decade after the 'German problem' arose to consciousness once

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<sup>21</sup> Ernst Bloch, 'Nonsynchronism and the Obligation to Its Dialectics', *New German Critique* no 11, pp 22-38.

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again, is to give each story participating in this complex restatement its effectivity, its life as a fictive fragment of a 'real' history that can once again become multiple or plural in a truly dialectical sense. This 'letting be' is the more effective response to the obsession with continuity and origins besetting the revisionists during this crucial decade and can therefore be seen as pointing to the history of Fascism as being so many stories, narratives or images that in and of themselves (i.e. taken singly) appear to be mere harmless expressions of the 'German soul'. Fascism is implicitly (there are only two specific references to it in the entire film) asserted to have been possible because of the false mediation (of desires) in the 'modernised' age of 'information' where 'wisdom' is no longer possible. It constitutes a reconstruction of the German past from its own present, dangerous conjuncture – thus justifying, perhaps, Bloch's characterisation of it as an 'eclectic synthesis of reactionary tendencies'.<sup>21</sup>

This redemptive storytelling forms two movements: first, the presentation of a series of narrativised images that elucidate the metanarrative, transcendental urge in German cultural history, followed by an illustration of the way this urge has been mediated at various points through time; second, how the continuing presence of this phenomenon of mediation in contemporary life effects the prospects for some measure of authoritative interconnection.

With regard to the first, the narrator presents us with a series of image-stills (cinema seen as converting the oral heritage or tradition of telling stories into vision or visual statement, a two-dimensional ideology of vision – appropriate to our post-Renaissance perspectival condition – that is used within the frame of the succession of moving images). The themes of these images are subsequently elaborated in counterpoint to specific allusions to periods defining the exigencies of war. These proverbs or maxims foreground desire and imagination (and perspective itself: most of the painterly stills are circular and masked by black bordering) as being constitutive of the epic impulses of (Western) culture. After telling us that 'men's wishes take many forms', the narrator gives us some evocations of a pre-industrialised social milieu, cartoon-like constructions of fantasy which depict the frustration of this utopian sense and its frequent divergence into the dark, nether regions of pseudo-fulfilment. In one we see a solitary dwelling atop a range of jagged mountains visualised as transcendence (its proximity to many stars), as a haven of respite from the dark blue-green forces of the sea below; in another, continuous with the above and others like it in their tone and gothic suggestiveness, ships are seen sailing through rough water into an approaching embankment, this discovery impulse immediately highlighted and reinforced by the narrator's verbal and visual designation of 'A temple of the future, 16 BC'; finally, this desire is ultimately checked as we see a man with a lizard-like tail and wings flying in the midst of cavernous rock formations.

This story of misplaced and frustrated desire is juxtaposed with another one significant in its restatement of this pessimism as well as its proximity to our own horizons of experience. It is a scene from the war of

1812, (a pastiche of a '20s film, thus placing this vision within the 'modernised' era of film culture) that shows us the murder of a soldier on a battlefield whose meaning is apparently peripheral to that behind the conflict (the narrator says it is a 'senseless death, 1813, two days after the surrender'). Signalling the final betrayal of the utopian designs of the left after 1789, and surely Enlightenment ideals of progress as well, this jump forward in time further highlights the role of fictional and fantastical construction in relation to history in a sort of suturing device: a quick cut to a woman looking out of a window in horror simultaneous with the occurrence of the shooting draws attention to the production of fiction (to be taken as *real*) within an 'ideological' text. Though with the transition from the shooting to the watching of the murder the viewer is guided along in a scenario of credibility (we tend to identify with the observer's view within the fiction), the continuity from the one to the other is a false one and frames this 'classical' technique: the spatio-temporal connotations of each radically diverge (i.e. *mise-en-scène*, tonal suggestion and contrast, stylistic allusion, etc).

Telling these stories with images grounded before and after the 'modernising' period of the Enlightenment produces a kind of metacommentary on that supposed absolute purity of those early experiential stories or narratives: the old duality between experience and information is not *valid* any more as a prior meaning from this postmodernist perspective. This reframing points to an ideological constellation significant for the Fascist rewriting of history, an explosive 'synchronic construct' within or under which a whole concatenation of events were rewritten as self-evident, linear meaning. This construct is of course that continuity claimed by the Nazi voices which emerged victorious from the dangerous and polemical atmosphere of the decade or so before 1933 with the artisanal, pre-usurial values of a feudal Christian collectivity. (The codification of the 'romantic anti-capitalist' discourse whose most convincing ideological expression is Moeller van den Bruck's *Das dritte Reich* ('The Third Reich') in 1922, the culmination of a line, beginning with Bachofen, through the nineteenth century that is charted in Fritz Stern's *The Politics of Cultural Despair*.<sup>22</sup>)

The tableau 'In the Years 1138 to 1268' focuses on the specific period that so intrigued the Nazis. Here the tactic resembles Foucault's technique of 'reversal', whereby attention is drawn to the categories employed in a particular moment of history to understand a phenomenon in an age before this concept or way of thinking had arisen (in Foucault, the use of psychiatric categories to understand witchcraft or magic in pre-psychiatric societies<sup>23</sup>). The suggestion here is that the Fascist constitution of the object *pre-industrial utopia* is a narrative unity in service to forms of societal domination. The reversal is a demonstration that there is no such thing as this self-evident, utopian pool of forms and ideas prominently generating the Nazi retrogression, its taken-for-grantedness therefore requiring a 'de-realisation'.

A series of slides constitute this reversal and follow from the narrator's intonation: 'In the twelfth century wishes are very simple.' We observe

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<sup>22</sup> Fritz Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1973.

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<sup>23</sup> John Rajchman, 'The Story of Foucault's history', *Social Text* no 8, Winter 1983-84, p 11.

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<sup>24</sup> Jack Zipes, 'The Instrumentalization of Fantasy: Fairy Tales and the Mass Media', in Kathleen Woodward (ed), *The Myths of Information*, Madison, Coda Press, 1980, p 88.

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<sup>25</sup> *ibid*, p 96.

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<sup>26</sup> *ibid*, p 100.

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the extreme caricature of the simple life, a feudal universe in its ordered chain stretching from a manor and subjects all in place to a deity. But the image is that of serfs labouring before a castle, while on the periphery one of them is beaten away by soldiers. And another voice declares: 'Soldiers yelled at us. We had nothing. They wanted something. So now I must dig. My land and property are burned. Now I dig my own grave. Already the children call. Coming. God help me in the Kingdom of Heaven. The group from above.' A consecutive image appears (the voice-over overlaying its appearance) of a subject looking off (screen), as if clamouring for external sustenance, while the camera reinforces this movement: it pans upward to the image of a figure, a leader of some sort on horseback with a lance.

One might suspect that one particular variety of story, that of the fairy tale (Benjamin's example in fact), might escape contamination since it is this genre that has historically performed a 'progressive' service in bringing forth experiences sealed over and denied in rational reconstructions of the past, in working against authoritarianism and commodity fetishism and thereby subverting instrumental rationality through the imagination (whose function it has been to oppose social manipulation and arbitrary domination). Yet Kluge's redemptive storytelling historicises this form as well, essaying an equivalent of Novalis' dictum: 'With time history must become a fairy tale – becoming once again what it was in the beginning.'<sup>24</sup> Again, the transformation of the power of this particular type of fiction through time is seen as being implicated in the conditions of possibility spawning Fascism, in the conflation of history and fairy tale. Here the connection with Hessen, the site where the abolition of the study of history as a subject is being contemplated in the late '70s, is significant. The Grimms made their first collection of folk tales in Hessen in 1812, initiating an intensive rewriting of the past (the historicising imagination of the nineteenth century) that can be viewed from our perspective as a reframing of the original genre of the tale. (What we know as the eighteenth century fairy tale was an appropriation by aristocratic and bourgeois writers in the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries of the folk tale proper.<sup>25</sup>) As has been noted<sup>26</sup>, the Grimm brothers' project of establishing 'authentic folk tales' was carried out by trained professionals who often stylised the tales, changed them, and were highly selective in their 'unearthing' so that, once gathered, they were rarely read and circulated among the original audiences. And this is consistent with other tendencies in the nineteenth century treatment of the genre: many subsequent rewritings didacticised and trivialised the tales to conform to the strictures of the growing commercial entertainment industry.

Thus the narrator's illustrated assertion that Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm's excavation was designed to examine 'how people deal with their wishes' needs to be seen in the light of this (absent) context. Again, its implications derive from a reversal of the logic that must have motivated the Grimms' and subsequent reconstructions of and modifications to the fairy tale. The self-evidence of this project for so many over the past

century and a half can perhaps be ascribed to the still current idea (from Hegel?) that the State is a progressively evolving rational entity that accordingly realises universal reconstructions of the past through its propitious delegation of resources. The film's treatment of the Grimms' project performs the denial of this classic view of the State (as existing outside of mediation) and even suggests, à la Foucault, that we might discover semblances of reason in the past *only* through the rational constructs of the present. This is accomplished in a candid interview with Hans Heckel, the current chief inspector of schools in Hessen, who has made it a hobby to read fairy tales for the purpose of collating them into some kind of order whose discursive authority is not thrown into relief. In fact, as the interviewer reveals, though Heckel claims to avoid any 'orderly or systematic' procedure, taking each tale 'point by point' as spontaneously given, his critical burrowing is quite analytical and ideological: he wants to collect the material according to a 'legal viewpoint' (a restoration of Hegel's equation of law, narrative authority and historicity?) that appears to resemble the disposition coincident with his position as administrator in the contemporary 'rational' State – he says he is 'organising and coordinating' the Culture Ministry into 'sub-departments'. His description of his work reveals a trivialisation (one tale is titled 'Cat and Mouse in Society') and naive, chance designation of a story structure that constitutes an ideologised re-authorisation of the past, while at the same time permitting – actually encouraging – an identification with materials having a potentially ideological effectivity in the present. (He subtitles one as the 'story of a mass murder with a curiously happy ending'.<sup>27</sup>)

That this kind of structure is appropriable is clear from a few successive cuts, Kluge's final reversal. Wanton and inexplicable violence mediated by the fairy tale in 1979 leads us to a shot of an enlarged map, a filmic representation where the eye glides quickly across the surface of a pre-World War One geography of Germany (though constructed in our present) to alight finally on Verdun, the site of a fantastic massacre of history. Documentary footage from the early '30s is then presented of Hindenburg inspecting the troops, followed by a close-up of him in his quarters that evokes a sense of resignation, of his being on his way out in preparation for the surge of Nazism (he waves to the audience as he leaves his office). And after a cut to another still image of the moon, stars and a surreal landscape, the narrator concludes: 'He who laughs at fairy tales has never suffered.'

## V

What then does *Die Patriotin* offer regarding 'The Question of Connection', the title of the last tableau? Against what has been termed, in the relatively recent debate on postmodernism, tendencies to metanarrative legitimisation grounded in a realm of universal ethical principles (Habermas) and the fatalistic dependency on the several micro-narratives

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<sup>27</sup> Perhaps the most telling example is 'The Tale of the Seven Ravens': 'The King and the Queen, after waiting years and having seven sons, finally have a daughter. They're so happy that the King decides to kill the seven sons so that his kingdom will go to his daughter. It's told in the style of Biedermeier or late Baroque....' 'When asked what the legal viewpoint is in this tale, Hans Heckel responds: 'Legally it's nothing. As King and absolute ruler the father can kill his children and go unpunished. Isn't that obvious?'

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<sup>28</sup> The best recent summary is in Richard Rorty, 'Habermas and Lyotard on Postmodernity', *Praxis International* (forthcoming); and Christopher Norris, 'Philosophy as a Kind of Narrative: Rorty on Postmodern Liberal Culture', *Enclitic*, vol 7 no 2, pp 149-58.

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<sup>29</sup> Rajchman, op cit, pp 4-6.

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<sup>30</sup> Kluge is one of the lesser-known personalities of the New German vanguard, the audience for his films being significantly smaller and more 'academic' than for the others. The most obvious reason for his re-framing of popular forms would seem to lie in the limitations of 'classic' cinema for commenting upon history. Cinema as the expression of an illusory immediacy is such a major problem for Kluge – as it was for Metz, though for different reasons – that it must be foregrounded.

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of everyday life as a kind of temporary sustenance from the loss of meaning (attributed essentially to Lyotard and bearing affinities to the deconstructive attack against reference)<sup>28</sup>, Kluge's redemptive storytelling can be seen as a symbolic compromise formation giving expression to a time of transition when no final grounding is believed possible. A historical materialist intervention assumes that some ultimate ground is capable of being referred to: whether the class struggle (however variously modified in the several post-Marxisms to accommodate the changed realignment of class), an amorphous confidence in progress and perfectability (both the framing of prior futurist ideologies, and the questioning of what the future holds for Western society recur frequently in this film), or some semblance of a 'mode of production'. In this latter sense, Kluge's persistence – especially in this particular work – in drawing attention to the deficiencies in the public sphere coincident with the advanced capitalist mode of production, is consistent with this type of intervention. Yet the metacritical nature of this work (particularly the relative absence of any polemic pertaining to Fascism specifically) tends to establish it as a theory of historical materialism, a dialectical materialism in the truly post-Marxist sense. If no final grounding is possible, this 'second-order' rewriting may constitute the desire for a temporary grounding, an attempt to get belief back in the system as opposed to the mere assertion of any immanent truth or meaning.

The question then becomes whether Kluge's 'resolution' or 'connection' in the final tableau escapes the pitfalls that have come to be associated with other 'metahistorical' discourses. Can it be accused, like Foucault's history, of failing to produce a form of criticism useful in political struggles?<sup>29</sup> Does this temporary grounding, meant to avoid a didactic, moralising statement in order to escape further polarisation in the highly volatile atmosphere of contemporary Germany, get transmitted to the audiences that Kluge realises need to receive it, those who are not tuned-in to the 'post-critical' modifications to the montage/collage form?

Accepting the general indictment against Kluge's works regarding the disjunction between theory and practice and the excessively complex orchestration of material that inevitably bypasses most viewers<sup>30</sup>, it is nonetheless the case that his 'deep' historical analysis is offered as just another story to be processed by good citizens in a depoliticised, transitional era as they lie in wait for some return to the 'properly political'. This story lacks pretension to universality, and the bringing forth of all the various 'subjective' responses to an 'objective reality', typical of the dialectical method, simply acknowledges that the past isn't providing good models for present performance. His redemptive story-telling is therefore a single, allegorical gesture (not a *unique* one, an original re-writing, but a single expression of a particular production model) aimed at restructuring perception for the future.

Thus the last tableau should be understood as highlighting the uppermost necessity in Kluge's story: the need to unmask and counter the obsession with reason and causality itself that gestures of political inter-

vention in the late '70s would surely augment. But here any summation of a connection between Fascism and the excesses of rationalisation is further distanced from an assertive form of argument. Instead, the narrator brings back the total person of Corporal Wieland, whose absence was formerly represented by the joint of a knee, in order more effectively to demonstrate the presence of Fascism in its effects. And there is a further mutation in the narrative voice: the speaking knee itself criticises this reconstruction (documentary footage of Wieland with others in uniform saluting the swastika) as literally the embodiment of reason. The knee gives us a capsule view of Wieland's personality, representative of the Fascist rationalisation of the body generally, saying that he personifies that 'fundamental and axiomatic' knowledge which we begin to translate as those misplaced, epic desires evident in the effects of a stiffening of the body, most noticeably in the goose-step. A kind of revenge of the body upon the excesses of mind dictating its future existence can be seen in a demonstration of this peculiar perversion of form. As Nazi officers perform this 'aesthetic of marching', the narrator comments: 'Fundamentally knees should never just stretch like this, but rather they must bend and then stretch.' Reason ossifies, assimilates all potentially alternative steps and subordinate phases into a singular, rigid gesture. Conversely the fragments of *Die Patriotin* provide the basis for a kind of understanding that can be achieved when individual perceptions, inherently limited as isolated contemplations of the event, pass into the sort of collective synapse—something greater than the sum of the parts—that is only possible with a restructuring of the spheres of communication.

*Die Patriotin* is distributed in Britain by the Other Cinema, 79 Wardour Street, London W1 (01-734 8508)

# COMMUNITY, NOSTALGIA AND THE SPECTACLE OF MASCULINITY

GINETTE VINCEDEAU ANALYSES  
THE JEAN GABIN PERSONA IN FILMS  
FROM THE POPULAR FRONT PERIOD

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<sup>1</sup> Ephraim Katz, *The International Film Encyclopedia*, London, Macmillan, 1982, p 459.

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<sup>2</sup> Dilys Powell, *The Sunday Times*, November 21, 1976.

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IN TERMS OF economic power and authorial status, Jean Gabin is the only 'real' star of French cinema of the 1930s. The so-called Gabin 'myth' is effectively an intricate intertextual construction which radiates through not only the films themselves, but also an array of other texts such as memoirs and testimonies (his and others), fan magazines, newspaper reports, plays, music-hall shows and songs. From these has emerged the familiar image of the 'strong, silent and often deeply human hero, and more often, anti-hero, of such milestones of the French cinema as Duvivier's *Pépé le Moko*, Renoir's *La Grande Illusion* and Carné's *Quai des Brumes*.'<sup>1</sup> Both Gabin the proletarian hero *par excellence* and 'a screen symbol the world over of the tough but tender Frenchman'<sup>2</sup> have been widely analysed and although the literature on the subject would benefit from a re-appraisal, it is not my purpose here.

My present concern, rather, stems from an awareness that an important component of the Gabin screen representations, and hence 'myth', namely masculinity, has been overlooked or, if not overlooked, at any rate taken as a self-evident, transparent, factor. The relevance of an analysis of the Gabin screen persona from such a point of view is manifold and furthermore relates to a number of current debates in film studies and history.

Since the interest in sexual difference in relation to film has come primarily under the impulse of feminism, the concentration has been on



images of women and on the relation between female sexuality and textual systems. The debate on masculinity, in this respect, has only just begun. Moreover, where writers and scholars (Richard Dyer, Paul Willemsen, Steve Neale, Andrew Britton) have shown an interest in this area, it has been overwhelmingly related to American cinema – as indeed have been the studies of femininity and female stars. Looking at how a male *European* star functions in films which are part of French film history as well as being ‘classic narrative’ films in the Hollywood sense of the term, opens up several levels of enquiry. Furthermore, as the character portrayed by Jean Gabin in his mid- and late 1930s films were all proletarians, the question of sexual difference also intersects with that of the representation of class in, and the historical inscription of, films made in the crucial period of the Popular Front, Munich and the approach of the Second World War. A re-examination here is of particular interest since the current *doxa* on the subject of the cinema of the Popular Front in France too readily equates the proletarian *male* hero with ‘the proletariat’.

This article concentrates on *La Belle Equipe* and *Pépé le Moko*, two films directed by Julien Duvivier, as popular entertainments within the mainstream French film industry of the period. It is worth remembering this, particularly in relation to *La Belle Equipe*, which has won itself a place in film history primarily as a ‘Popular Front film’<sup>3</sup>. Both films were shot in 1936; *La Belle Equipe* was released in November 1936, *Pépé le Moko* in January 1937. The latter was a triumph both in France and internationally, while the former had a more modest, though ‘honourable’ box-office career (it ranked fifty-ninth of the 75 films deemed successes in 1936, out of the 450-odd shown that year). Both were designed to accommodate the Gabin persona which had emerged fully in Duvivier’s *La Bandera* (1935) – the story of Spanish legionnaires in Morocco – also a box-office hit.

### Intertexts: Populism and Proletarian Heroes

The success of *Pépé le Moko* prompted an immediate Hollywood remake: *Algiers* (directed by John Cromwell) which was filmed with a print of the French film on the moviola on the set for a shot-by-shot correlation. It was made with stars of equal if not higher international status, Charles Boyer and Hedy Lamarr. But whereas *Pépé* had a triumphal release, *Algiers*’ performance at the box office was less brilliant. Contemporary reviews, though complimentary about the competence of the film as a whole, often stress the ‘miscasting’ of Boyer as *Pépé*, while recognising his impeccable credentials as an actor. The ‘inadequacy’ of Boyer for the part of *Pépé* could be summed up by the nickname *Pépé-le-Monsieur* (*Pépé the Gentleman*) that was given to him by a critic. In other words, Boyer’s relative failure was one of register: he could not embody a convincing criminal who was also a proletarian hero. Gabin, on the other hand, represented *the* proletarian hero. That was, first, a

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Goffredo Foffi, ‘The Cinema of the Popular Front in France (1934-1938)’, *Screen* Winter 1972/73, vol 14 no 4, esp pp 38-39. Reprinted from *Giovane Critica* 10 (Winter 1966).

function of his screen persona, able to accommodate dichotomies (e.g. honest/dishonest) for the successful resolution of the narratives of his films. But Gabin's equation with the proletarian hero was also overdetermined by powerful intertexts specific to France in the 1930s. Particularly relevant here are the dominant populism of the period present in all popular art forms, the importance of performance in French films of the 1930s (Gabin started his career as a music-hall performer) and the dominance of narratives involving all-male groups spread across a variety of genres (army melodramas, military vaudevilles, populist melodramas).

Contrary to *boulevard* comedies or navy melodramas (an idiosyncratic seaboard French genre of the '30s) set among the leisured classes and which derive mostly from a theatrical intertext, films set in working-class milieux or the underworld tended to draw primarily on novelistic material. Duvivier, like Clair and Genina, like Carné, Renoir, Chenal and others, was working against the background of populist literature prominent in the '20s and '30s and used it. Populist writers such as Pierre Mac Orlan, Marcel Aymé, Francis Carco and Georges Simenon were adapted for the screen, but the influence of populism went beyond direct adaptations. What these writers (and many others) had in common was their fascination with the working-class milieu and the underworld, an interest they shared with many others involved in the popular arts of the time: singers, graphic artists, photographers and film-makers. It is a fascination which in effect dates back to the late nineteenth century, to Dumas, Zola and Maupassant, and had been transmitted to the tradition of the 'realist' singers typified by Fréhel (who appears in *Pépé le Moko*), Damia and later Edith Piaf.

The populist interest in the 'lower classes' should not, however, be confused with socially committed art. *La Belle Equipe* may start off as a film 'about' a workers' co-op, but the subject of the film is quickly displaced from the workers' endeavours to make the co-op succeed to the sexual rivalries that eventually destroy it. The social referential world in the film thus becomes a background for a melodramatic intrigue rather than the substance of the film itself, a point Duvivier explicitly acknowledged when he said: 'The Popular Front may have been taking shape while I was making the second half of the film, but *La Belle Equipe* is not political – unless you count all films with workers in them as left-wing.'<sup>4</sup>

What interests populist art is the *spectacle* of the 'lower classes'. Writers, film-makers or photographers, in the 1930s, express a common fascination for the *petit peuple* (usually of Paris), shopkeepers, concierges, artisans, and also the more marginal fringes of that class, right down to the underworld. The same preoccupation with *looking at*, with 'knowing' this stratum of French urban society is echoed in a wide range of texts all the way through from Léon Lemonnier's *Manifeste du roman populiste* ('We believe that the *peuple* offers a very rich novelistic subject-matter, one which is almost entirely unexplored'<sup>5</sup>) to Marcel Carné's exhortation to 'describe the simple life of the people, to render the atmosphere of its labouring humanity'<sup>6</sup>. The photographer Brassai, not

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<sup>4</sup> Julien Duvivier, interview, *Cinéma*, September 15, 1959.

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<sup>5</sup> Léon Lemonnier, *Manifeste du Roman Populiste*, Paris, Jacques Bernard, 1929, p. 23.

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<sup>6</sup> Marcel Carné, *Cinéma*, no 85, 1930.

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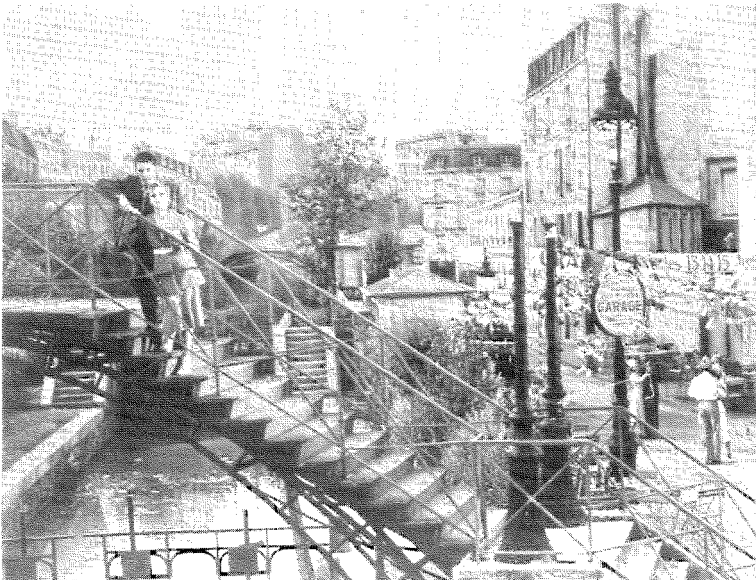
surprisingly, articulates most openly the voyeuristic drive behind this essentially bourgeois fascination. Brassai, who specialised in taking night photographs of Paris, re-issued recently in the famous *The Secret Paris of the 30s*, chose as his subjects both workers (e.g., the cesspool cleaners) and pimps, prostitutes and mobsters, stating that he 'wanted to know what went on inside, behind the walls, behind the façades, in the wings'<sup>7</sup>.

What Brassai's pictures have in common with Mac Orlan's novels, Carné and Duvivier's films, or Fréhel's songs, is an iconography which gives prominence to a *décor*, that of the popular areas of Paris, usually at night and often shiny with rain, with highly contrasted lighting. The Parisian tall building is a key element, with its staircase a strong focal point (as in *La Belle Equipe*) and its rooftops perhaps the most recognisable motif (all Clair's early '30s films). André Bazin has underlined the importance of the building in Carné's *Le Jour se Lève*<sup>8</sup> (1939), and Henri Jeanson, scriptwriter of his *Hôtel du Nord* (1938), described the latter as 'a love story between HIM: the canal, and HER: the hotel'<sup>9</sup>. Even in *Pépé le Moko* where the Parisian décor is physically absent, it is still the desired object and point of reference; this is made explicit in the famous scene where Pépé and Gaby find a way of communicating by reciting the names of *métro* stations, ending together on *Place Blanche*, an emblematic choice since it is the point where the working-class areas of Montmartre meet the seedy underworld of Pigalle. Paris, its popular areas and its underworld, are also at the centre of the world brought to life by the 'realist' song, or *chanson vécue*. Beyond this, the populist iconography concentrates on a number of privileged *loci*, notably the cafés in town and on river banks in the country (themselves rendered familiar by late nineteenth century Impressionist paintings).

<sup>7</sup> Brassai, preface to *The Secret Paris of the 30s*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1976.

<sup>8</sup> André Bazin, notes on *Le Jour se Lève* (1947), in Jacques Chevallier and Max Egly (eds), *Regards Neufs sur le Cinéma*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1963.

<sup>9</sup> Henri Jeanson, 'Le métier de scénariste', *Cinéma 56*, vol 11 no 10.



*Hôtel du Nord*: HIM, the canal and HER, the hotel.

<sup>10</sup> Préjean is mainly remembered as the hero of Clair's *Sous les Toits de Paris* (1931), but his '30s filmography includes some of the most notable populist French films: *Un Soir de Rafle* (d. by Carmine Gallone, 1931), *Le Paquebot Tenacity* (d. by Duvivier, 1934), *L'Or dans la Rue* (d. by Curtis Bernhardt, 1934), *Dédé* (d. by René Guissart, 1934), *Un Mauvais Garçon* (d. by Jean Boyer, 1936), *Jenny* (d. by Carné, 1936), *L'Alibi* (d. by Chenal, 1937), *Mollenard* (d. by Robert Siodmak, 1937), *La Rue sans Joie* (d. by André Hugon, 1938), *Métropolitain* (d. by Maurice Cam, 1938), and *Dédé la Musique* (d. by André Berthomieu, 1939).

But whether in songs, photographs, posters, novels or films, the most powerful iconographic motif of all is that of the proletarian hero himself, who focuses all the representations of the proletariat and the underworld at the same neuralgic point. The (populist) proletarian hero oscillates between the good-natured worker and the sinister criminal (or pimp) but often includes elements of both in varying proportions. What unifies these different values are the clothes, the language and the accents. The example of one simple piece of clothing, the cap, shows this condensing effect. The right-wing activists in Renoir's *La Vie est à nous* (1936) chose caps, as symbols of the working classes (which they called *salopards*) on the cardboard cut-outs they used as targets in their shooting practice. The same year, for the Bastille Day celebrations, the cap-manufacturing union took part in the marches with the slogan *Vivent les salopards en casquette*, caps there standing for the proletariat, as opposed to the berets worn by right-wing war veterans. At the same time, the lyrics of the very popular theme song of *Un Mauvais Garçon* (directed by Jean Boyer, 1936), a filmed populist operetta, also singled out the cap as symbol of the labouring classes tainted, for the bourgeois, with criminality.



Gabin, in cloth cap, symbolising the labouring classes in *La Belle Equipe*.

Populist films, being fascinated by the *spectacle* of the working-classes and the underworld, significantly feature actors who are also performers. Gabin, as well as Albert Préjean (star of many populist films<sup>10</sup>) and less prominent actors in the populist vein such as Andrex, had a music-hall background and sang. Recordings of their songs (often from the films) contributed to their fame. This emphasis on performance has, as we shall see, important implications in terms of the representation of the male proletarian hero and of his community.

Towards the beginning of *La Belle Equipe* there is a sequence which employs the long take and complex camera movement in the characteristic style of director Julien Duvivier: here a crane shot with a zig-zag movement describes the shape of the open staircase and the descending movement of two characters (Jean and the hotel owner). The shot is very long (one minute, 35 seconds) and draws us by its movement to the central character. At the same time, it powerfully links him with his environment: the staircase in the seedy hotel.

The next scene takes place in a café, the group's displaced home, a surrogate home for the uprooted urban worker, and a motif common to many French populist films of the '30s (a particularly apt example is *Hôtel du Nord*). In *La Belle Equipe*, it is in the country café, (the *guinguette*) that the group of friends will build their new 'home'. This café scene further establishes the centrality of the Gabin character, through camera angles (the only low angle shots are for him) and movements. A typical shot of the friends is a pan across the group, panning back to frame Gabin at the centre. A similar strategy operates in *Pépé le Moko* in the scenes set among Pépé and his acolytes.

In addition to camera movements, lighting is used to establish Gabin's place in the narrative. The precise technique is that of a thin band of light on his eyes, offset by semi-darkness in the rest of the frame (legend has it that Gabin's eyes were severely burnt while shooting *Pépé le Moko* as a result of Duvivier's over-indulgence in the technique). The emphasis on Gabin's eyes by way of spot lighting is a constant feature in his late '30s films. This 'expressionist' type of lighting is used to signal particular states of mind: deep thought (*Le Jour se Lève*, where they also



Gabin's eyes  
signifying difference  
in *Le Jour se Lève*.



mark the beginning of flashbacks), moments of intense decision-making, or even madness (*La Bête humaine*, directed by Renoir, 1938). In any case, the effect always signals *difference*.

While both *La Belle Equipe* and *Pépé le Moko* focus on small groups of male friends and ultimately on their central hero, in both films these groups are set among (or against) wider communities. *La Belle Equipe* exhibits the women in the workshop making flowers, the hotel population, the customers of the country café. In *Pépé le Moko*, apart from the gangsters on the one hand (of whom Pépé's gang is the hard core) and the police on the other, the largest community represented is the Casbah, characterised mostly by its women. As befits the populist atmosphere in both films, these communities are presented as essentially composed of simple working people, even though there is a slippage, from 'honest' in *La Belle Equipe*, to 'dishonest' in *Pépé le Moko*: the women making flowers in Paris are replaced by the prostitutes of the Casbah, the workers by criminals. But in neither film are the communities actually defined by their occupations. These are presented as a *given* in the films and not explored in either case (the prostitutes are not seen at work with clients, the criminals are not seen performing their exploits). At the same time, it is clear that the communities are not simply decor and that they stand as the embodiment of certain values.

The first striking element is, in both films, the ambiguity in the relationship between the hero and the community. It is particularly explicit in *Pépé le Moko*, where the Casbah population is both a liberating presence (it is comforting, supportive, and protects Pépé from the police) and a repressive one: it is, in effect, a prison, hence Pépé's overwhelming desire to leave Algiers. The strong identification of the Casbah with its women designates this structure as the classic Oedipal dilemma of the (male) child's relation to the mother. In displaying the Casbah as both immediate (joyful, desirable) and yet already *passée*, the film, moreover, inscribes the representation of the community as fundamentally nostalgic. This nostalgia frames other types of nostalgia (notably for Paris) which reflect each other. In *La Belle Equipe*, the hotel population plays a similar role to the Casbah in *Pépé le Moko*. Whereas it represents something Jean and his friends want to leave behind, it also evokes, in the scene where they celebrate winning the lottery, a supportive community, thematically reminiscent of other populist films (Clair's *Le Million* of 1931, *Quatorze Juillet* of 1933, Carné's *Hôtel du Nord*, etc) and which the group of friends try (in vain) to recreate in their country café. The communities evoked by the two films are neither the latter's subjects, nor a mere decor. The films navigate between these two poles, making the communities both central and peripheral, active and passive, by transforming them into audiences. Thus, it is through their common look at a spectacle that the communities are constructed as important structures within the films: passive in the sense that they are not themselves performing, and active through their gaze at, and therefore construction of, the performer, Jean Gabin.

In *La Belle Equipe*, the scene where Gabin goes down the open stair-

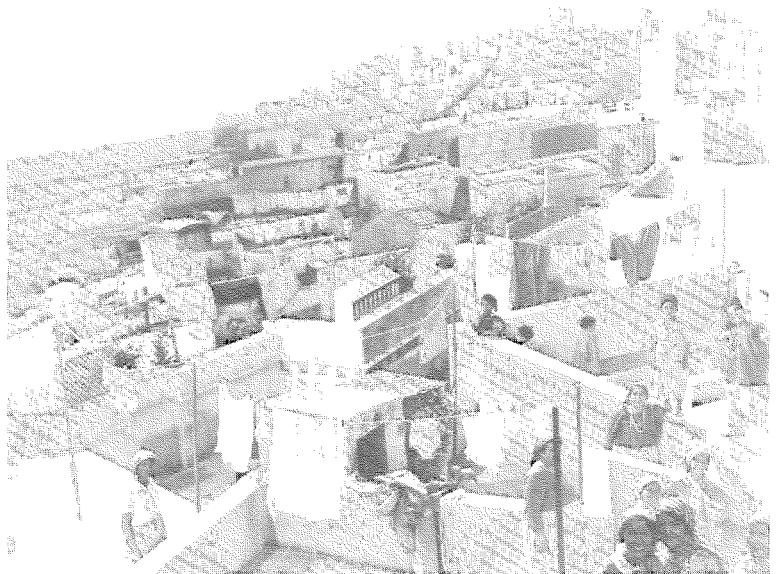
case anticipates another scene on the same staircase, itself a rehearsal for the song in the country café in the second half of the film. The second staircase episode follows the news that the groups of friends have won a million francs in a lottery. In the general confusion which ensues, the staircase, open to the courtyard, acts as a stage for the display of the community spirit. Gabin, already identified with the staircase where he vented his anger against the hotel owner, is seen again 'performing', this time his joy, and with the community as witness. The zig-zag movement of the crane shot following the shape of the stairs also serves to link the members of the community together, pausing slightly at both ends of each landing, where people are seen coming out of their rooms, at the sound of Gabin's voice. He is here both our figure of identification and the object of attention of the diegetic audience. At the end of the scene, the camera tracks back, revealing the whole staircase, full of people – the effect of the long shot being to bind all the characters and the environment together, to present them as a unified whole in that space.

The same phenomenon operates when Gabin performs in a more classic sense, singing *Quand on s'promène au bord de l'eau*. The effect of the scene is, primarily, dynamic; the camera movements follow closely those of the performer, affording the spectator privileged access to him. At the same time, the scene includes the diegetic audience in several ways. First, through the figure of Jean's double, a drunk who replaces him temporarily by singing himself. Then, various members of the community are singled out in short close-ups, taking active part in the entertainment (singing) while remaining 'passive' (sitting down, not unlike a cinema audience). Then, finally, the whole audience is bound together in a long shot, where the audience status of the guests at the country café is emphasised by the view of themselves from the back and sitting down.

In their appeal to workers who, after their week of drudgery, find solace in the pleasures of the riverside and country café, the lyrics of Gabin's songs are often taken to echo the new social policies of the Popular Front government which, by introducing paid holidays, revealed the pleasures of the open air to millions of workers. This is no empty claim – although it has to be balanced against the knowledge that the countryside surrounding Paris had long before 1936 been opened up to the city's workers and artisans by the spreading railway network. Perhaps more importantly, however, the lyrics of *Quand on s'promène au bord de l'eau* echo what the scene is showing through the *mise-en-scène*: the community bound together, not by work, but by the pursuit of pleasure and leisure. Thus, the representation of performance and audience within the film reflects what the cinema itself does outside it: that is, restructure a community through spectatorship.

In *Pépé le Moko*, the emphasis in the lyrics of the song performed by Gabin is more on individual pleasure. However, the scene where the song occurs also elicits a sense of community bound by its look at the performer. Throughout most of the song, Gabin is not seen, though his voice is heard. What we see on screen is a quick montage of a wide range

of Casbah inhabitants, an old woman sifting grain, a young woman delousing her son, prostitutes, a young girl also sifting grain, a (male) shoemaker beating a shoe to the rhythm of the song, women dancing likewise to the rhythm of the song. The scene therefore acts both as the expression of P  p  's state of mind and as the construction of a community through its common look at the performer and attention to his song (even incorporating his rhythm). Spectatorship is established both on an aural and a visual register. Through their *mise-en-sc  ne*, as well as thematically, both *La Belle Equipe* and *P  p   le Moko* thus structurally construct a community in its pursuit of pleasure and spectatorship. It is now time to turn to the nature of the spectacle which binds the communities together, and, by extension, the spectators of the films themselves.



The inhabitants of the Casbah watching the off-screen P  p  .

### Jean Gabin: the Male Hero as Object of the Look

Whereas it is now generally accepted that classic (Hollywood) cinema constructs women as privileged objects of a gaze which is primarily male, it is also necessary to problematise this position in terms of the female spectator on the one hand and of central male characters on the other. The films of Jean Gabin are a particularly interesting example of the latter. *Gueule d'Amour* (directed by Jean Gr  millon, 1937), arguably Gabin's most perfect 'vehicle', constructs its narrative around him as object of attention and desire of women. While *La Belle Equipe* and *P  p   le Moko* have narratives overtly concerned with different problems, their apparent themes are to some extent contradicted by the manner in which the *mise-en-sc  ne* singles out the star as the object of the look. Gabin's

status as performer makes him the spectacle within both films, but both films also construct him as such in other ways, proceeding further to a fetishisation of his image, which in effect becomes 'feminised' in the process.

It is significant that Gabin does not make his entrance at the beginning of either film, but is the structuring absence and the subject of the dialogue in both cases. In *La Belle Equipe*, Mario tells Huguette that only Jean can resolve his dangerous situation. In *Pépé le Moko* the process is more marked, as Pépé is the sole subject of conversation between the members of the Algiers and Paris police. His identity, exploits, but above all 'charm' are exposed. Significantly, this is done by Inspector Slimane who, in a medium-close up frontal shot (the only one in this segment of the film), directly addresses the camera and, hence, the spectator as well ('It's not surprising that the others admire him. And a nice guy on top of it, with a heart of gold, smiles for his friends come as easy to him as knives for his enemies; in short, charming!'<sup>11</sup>). The delay in Gabin's entrance in both films is of course part of standard industry practice (raising audiences' expectations of the presence of the star in the film), it also works on another level, that of the impact of the star discourse on the film text itself. Being delayed, Gabin's entrance is made more *spectacular*.

In both *La Belle Equipe* and *Pépé le Moko*, there is a beautiful woman whom Gabin desires (and obtains) – Gina and Gaby – and who might be expected to fulfil the classic role of object of the gaze, with Gabin's look playing the part of relay for the (male) spectator. This classic scenario, however, is contradicted by the fact that both women, on meeting him for the first time, also express their desire for him. If this is most obvious in *Pépé le Moko*, it also operates in *La Belle Equipe*. Gina's status as

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<sup>11</sup> Pépé le Moko, *L'Avant-scène du cinéma*, no 269, June 1, 1981.

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Gina's provocative behaviour in *La Belle Equipe*.

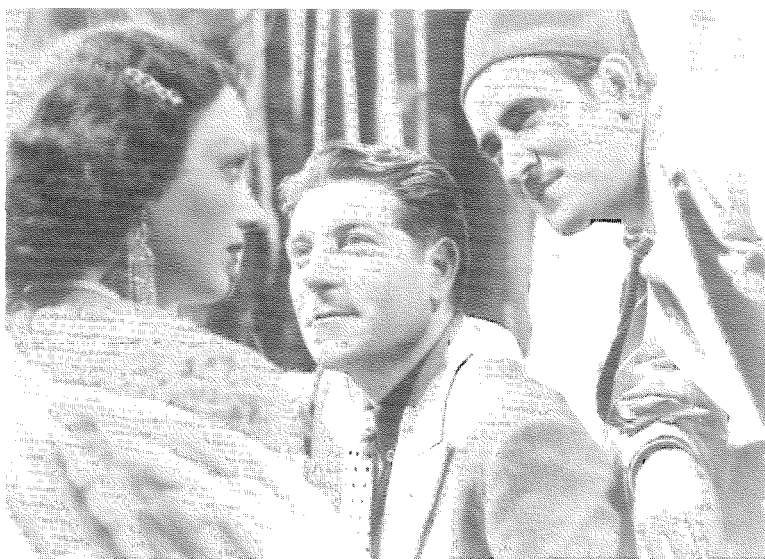
'model' (prostitute) allows her to express her desire by her provocative behaviour towards Jean – literally by her look when she meets him, but also by the flaunting of her own sexuality in the naked photographs on the walls of her bedroom, and in the deliberate removal of her stockings, a classic motif for the 'loose' woman.

In *Pépé le Moko*, Gaby's desire and fascination for Pépé are made more explicit. She herself stages a second visit to the Casbah, abetted by Inspector Slimane, especially in order to *see* Pépé and to *show* him to her friends. Her first encounter with him is remarkably revealing in its organisation of looks.

Gaby and her friends are visiting the Casbah when the police raid takes place. Slimane takes her into a young Arab woman's house for shelter. As Gaby is being told about Pépé's exploits, he himself enters the room, followed by Jimmy and Max. The scene then displays to a remarkable degree the fetishisation of Gabin's image that operates generally in the two films. The beginning repeats the pattern previously outlined, that of the delay of Pépé's appearance (metonymically reproducing the beginning of the whole film). His exploits and reputation (his legend) are reiterated in the dialogue before he appears, thus heightening the expectations of the audience, both diegetic (Gaby) and in the cinema.

Pépé's entrance, off-frame, is represented through the gaze of Slimane and Gaby. When he appears on screen, it is as a fragmented body (his legs, a recurrent motif throughout the film, culminating in the famous scene of his final escape from the Casbah). When Pépé finally notices Gaby, their interaction follows the classic organisation of looks which is then effectively countered by two factors: firstly, Pépé is looking at her jewels, thereby initiating an identification between the two which will run throughout the film. Pépé's desire for Gaby is bound up with his desire for her jewels, as they are also the sign of her possession by another man – typically a father figure. The second reason why the scene does not follow the classic male-looking/female-looked at pattern is that Gaby looks with equal fascination at Pépé, whose face is lit in the same way as hers. However, although Gaby can assert her desire for Pépé, this desire is strictly circumscribed by the narrative because of her gender positioning. Although she tries to assert her independence by walking out on her 'sugar-daddy' with the jewels, the combined patriarchal forces of her protector and the police stop her. She is ultimately condemned to a role of exchange currency in the games played by men.

But this, to some extent, is familiar territory. In Howard Hawks' *Scarface* (the film usually taken to be *Pépé le Moko*'s model), Tony Camonte (Paul Muni) uses the same phrase – 'it's expensive' – to link the possessions of his boss – his silk dressing-gown, his cigars and his woman – all of which he covets. Tony Camonte, like Pépé, is dapper, narcissistically involved in his own image and, like Pépé too, the object of fascination of his gang of men, and of women. But *Pépé le Moko* goes further than *Scarface* in establishing its hero as the object of desire. Before the arrival of Gaby, Pépé is qualified as wanted by all women.



Desire and its objects: the exchange of looks between Pépé and the bejewelled Gaby under the gaze of Inspector Slimane.

But Pépé's status as erotic object is expressed most forcefully through Inspector Slimane's look. His fascination and desire for Pépé take overt voyeuristic forms in his obsession with Pépé's erotic exchanges with Gaby. Slimane's diegetic role as policeman makes it his duty to keep watch over Pépé's activities; however, the exchanges between the two men are overtly erotic and hence make Slimane's look at Pépé go beyond the call of professional duty. His repeated motto, that he wants to capture Pépé 'slowly, slowly', thus incurring his superiors' disapproval, also suggests the ritualistic pleasure of courtship in postponing the moment of conquest. Finally, always kept in the background, and at the



Pépé watched by his accomplices.

periphery of the frame, are P  p  's accomplices, silently watching him, following him, emulating him. Similarly, in *La Belle Equipe*, the members of the team, though they have more separate identity, follow Jean's every gesture.

The intense fetishisation of P  p  , in his centrality as object of the look and in the representation of his body as (erotic) spectacle, is often in excess of the requirements of classic narrative cinema. This in turn has important implications for the position allocated to the spectator in relation to the hero and the community represented by both films, and for the notion of masculinity represented.

### Identification and Spectator Positioning

While everything in *P  p   le Moko* combines to make P  p   the undisputed centre of attention, he is also constantly surrounded by groups of people. Thus, the spectators' look could be said to be mediated by the other characters who, in this respect, may become secondary figures of identification. Duvivier, however, makes sure, both in the narrative and the *mise-en-sc  ne*, that these characters are peripheral. The spectator's look is relentlessly directed at P  p   and the moments when he sings do not provide significant breaks from the narrative (the 1937 audience was also well aware of Gabin's training and experience as a music-hall singer). Thus, here, the code of the star works towards bridging the possible hiatus between narrative and spectacle, assisted by the ritualistic nature of some aspects of Gabin's acting. His famous explosions of violence, anticipated by the spectator, act as mini-spectacles in their own right, regardless of their narrative value. P  p  , in other words, is *constant spectacle* to the diegetic as well as cinema audience, who, as a result, enjoy a secure subject position, reinforcing the identification with P  p   and the spectacle he gives, and thus the spectacle of the whole film. For example, the scene where P  p   has an argument with In  s ends with the camera revealing that the whole street, including the ubiquitous Inspector Slimane, has been listening.

It could be argued that the very secure spectator position afforded by *P  p   le Moko* goes some way towards explaining its success. By contrast, the near box-office 'failure' of *La Belle Equipe* could be ascribed, at least partially, to a less complete cohesion of the conflicting demands of narrative and spectacle, despite the unifying presence of the star. This has to do with the different representation of community in the two films. In *P  p   le Moko* the Casbah has a relation to P  p   which is purely that of spectatorship, otherwise it is literally foreign to him and to the French spectator, radically *other* in cultural and ethnic terms. In *La Belle Equipe*, on the contrary, there is empathy between Jean, his group of friends, and the community at large, each inserted in and at the same time reflecting the larger group. This has the effect of splitting spectator identification between Jean, his friends, and the community. Moreover, the moments in *La Belle Equipe* given over to spectacle and performance (the scene on

the stairs, the song, the dance) emphasise the sense of solidarity between the hero and his milieu, whereas the narrative parts of the film work towards conflict and division. Whereas the spectacle scenes involve the spectator in the community *as well as* with the performing hero, the melodramatic narrative involves the spectator with the internal conflicts of the hero which precisely divide the community. The too apparent conflict between narrative and spectacle unsettles the spectator in his/her positions of identification, producing a less happy resolution and thus, arguably, a less 'successful' film.

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<sup>12</sup> J Duvivier, interview, *Cinéma*, September 15, 1959.

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<sup>13</sup> Steve Neale, 'Masculinity as Spectacle, Reflections on Men and Mainstream Cinema'. *Screen* November/December 1983, vol 24 no 6, p 16.

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### The Gabin Hero as 'Degree Zero' of Masculinity

Duvivier has declared in interviews that his films were always 'men's stories'<sup>12</sup>, a point substantiated by their concern with groups of men and their treatment of women. Summarily dismissed in *Pépé le Moko* by repeated exhortations to 'go home', the women attached to members of Pépé's gang are treated as appendages, even brutalised. If Gaby materially fares better, her economic subjection to her protector is made very clear. This attitude to women finds its most eloquent manifestation in the extraordinary scene in *La Belle Equipe* where Jean and Charles (lover and husband) go arm in arm to tell Gina that she has become redundant. The dialogues of both films abound in hostile and contemptuous remarks directed at women. But *La Belle Equipe* and *Pépé le Moko* are 'men's stories' beyond what might at first glance be interpreted simply as misogyny—they tell the story of masculinity or, rather, of one of its possible paths under a patriarchal regime and, in this respect, the films carry their historical and social inscription.

If, as has been argued<sup>13</sup>, masculinity in films is tested, not investigated, this testing nevertheless provides a definition. In both *La Belle Equipe* and *Pépé le Moko* the hero portrayed by Gabin is surrounded by a group of men. Compared to the complexity of his character, his friends or accomplices are one-dimensional, each the carrier of one of several characteristics which could be listed as follows. In *La Belle Equipe*, these include weakness (notably in front of women), irresponsibility, excessive sexuality (the 'latin lover'), extreme sensibility, alcoholism and homosexuality. In *Pépé le Moko*, these characteristics range across brutality, infantilism, de-sexualised age, deviousness, and the values traditionally associated with virility (in French culture at the time): physical strength, comradeship, attractiveness to women, the capacity to consume large amounts of alcohol. Each of the men surrounding the hero demonstrates one of these attributes, but crucially, *to excess*. In *Pépé le Moko* Carlos takes toughness to the point of brutality: he beats Tania, rips apart valuable fur coats; Pierrrot's youth leads to carelessness, and eventually his death. In *La Belle Equipe*, Charles' indulgence with Gina is construed as endangering the life of the group; Tintin's excessive drinking indirectly kills him. Mario's sexuality leads him away from the group, etc. At the same time, all these values are portrayed as essentially masculine and



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<sup>14</sup> See Claire Johnson, 'Women's Cinema as Counter-cinema', *Notes on Women's Cinema*, Society for Education in Film and Television, London, 1973, p 26.

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<sup>15</sup> Transcribed from film dialogue.

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positive: wine is part of communal celebrations in *La Belle Equipe*, violence is 'necessary' in *Pépé le Moko*—that is, generically justified.

The purpose of this configuration is, I would argue, twofold. First, it allows for the least acceptable male values to be endorsed by characters other than the hero. If wine is a good thing, the tragic consequences of its excessive intake can be shown by Tintin—if violence is necessary, its actual perpetration is left to Carlos. Thus complete empathy and identification with Jean/Pépé is made possible by the splitting of the positive and negative aspects of each value between characters. Secondly, and more importantly, the configuration I have outlined allows the film to present a definition of ideal masculinity *en creux*, by default. In *La Belle Equipe* and *Pépé le Moko*, masculinity is tested against its own excesses, its own caricatures. Thus the paradigm is male/excess male rather than male/female (or, to be precise, male/non-male<sup>14</sup>). Against the excessive values embodied by his friends and accomplices, the Gabin hero stands as the norm. It is not so much that they are weaker, inferior versions of himself, but that their embodiment of certain values (positive or negative) allows him to represent, by comparison, an equilibrium. Whereas they are one-dimensional and therefore incomplete, he is complex and complete, but the ideal masculinity he represents, being the result of a comparison to extremes rather than the positive affirmation of particular attributes, is strangely lacking in substance, the effect achieved being more that of a 'degree zero' or a neutral point than of an ultimate. It is a definition of masculinity which is more passive than active, more negative than positive. Another comparison with *Scarface* further substantiates this point. Whereas Tony Camonte is the epitome of 'action' (his motto is 'do it first, do it yourself and keep on doing it'<sup>15</sup>), Pépé's behaviour is almost the exact opposite. Apart from a short police raid and the settling of accounts during which the informer Régis is killed, nothing 'happens' in *Pépé le Moko*. For a gangster movie, it is remarkably slow-moving, repetitive and passive.

*La Belle Equipe* and *Pépé le Moko*, by almost eliminating women, elicit a definition through a relation of comparison with other men. This structure operates in practically all pre-war 'classic' Gabin films, most notably in *La Bandera* (directed by Duvivier, 1935) and *La Grande Illusion* (Renoir, 1937), where, again, generic demands eliminate women. The feminine, banished from the centre of the narrative, returns in different ways into the group of men, but most forcefully in its central hero. The ideal of masculinity embodied by Gabin which results from a comparison with all the possible and excessive positions granted to men under patriarchy, itself includes in significant proportion values traditionally ascribed to femininity. Hence Jean and Pépé are both ideal hero to their friends, and the object of their desire. The essential 'passivity' of Pépé (in relation to the model provided by the gangster genre) and the destructive hesitation of Jean between his desire for Gina and loyalty to his friendship with Charles can now be explained. By allowing a different male/female division to cut across its central hero, whose masculinity is thus truly at a 'degree zero', the films also allow him to be a powerful

figure of identification for both male and female spectators. And, as far as the male spectator is concerned, the anxieties that might have been aroused by an all-powerful hero are mitigated by the weaknesses and hesitations of his 'feminine' aspects.

It should not be assumed from the preceding analysis, that Duvivier's films are 'progressive' in their representation of sexuality and their admission of the erotic value of male heroes not only for female spectators but also male ones. Steve Neale commented *apropos* of Anthony Mann's westerns, that 'in a heterosexual and patriarchal society, the male body cannot be marked explicitly as the erotic object of another male look: that look must be motivated in some way, its erotic component repressed'<sup>16</sup>. Both *Pépé le Moko* and *La Belle Equipe* also find ways to channel their view of masculinity—despite its inclusion of the feminine—into more conventional routes, although in so doing they only partially eradicate contradictions.

Ideal masculinity in its conventional sense finds its testing ground in *Pépé le Moko* in a variety of 'devious' characters, whose deviance is punished according to its degree. Régis, the informer, is executed; l'Arbi, 'half-informer', is only knocked out. These outsiders also show how the attributes of masculinity can shift among the characters in the group: faced with a really deviant character, even an internally disunited group is then unified in its reassertion of virility. Hence, the striking scene in which Régis is killed by the whole group—including the already dead Pierrot. The phenomenon is even more marked when there is a hint of the greatest 'threat' to the notion of virility as represented, namely homosexuality. No doubt this shows the force of disavowal at work, since homosexuality is the logical extension of the predominantly male world of the films. This is evident in the ambiguous relation between Pépé and Slimane, where their physical closeness, evidenced by the image, is violently contradicted by their narrative antagonism and expressed in their repeated vows of mutual hostility. In *La Belle Equipe*, the fear of, and hence violent reaction to, homosexuality, is clearly signalled in the café scene previously discussed. There is one incident in it which, indeed, seems to have no other purpose: Jean contemptuously ejects from the group a grotesque but otherwise unthreatening individual who is later insultingly insinuated to be a homosexual.

With regard to *La Belle Equipe* and *Pépé le Moko*, there is a clearly observable paradox: the hero's masculinity on the one hand, overtly displayed with its traditional connotations of strength, courage and superiority to women, is accompanied by passivity and a distinct lack of maturity on the other. This paradox is underlined and echoed in the contradiction between the place of the Gabin hero *within* his group (where he reigns supreme) and his place *outside* it, where he is variously an outcast, a deviant or a solitary 'anti-hero' (murderer in *La Bandera*, thief in *Pépé le Moko* and *Les Bas-Fonds*, Renoir, 1936, deserter in *Quai des Brumes*, Carné, 1938) or an oppressed worker: engine driver in *La Bête humaine*, mechanic in *La Grande Illusion*, Renoir, 1937, mason in *La Belle Equipe*, typesetter in *Gueule d'Amour* and sandblaster in *Le Jour se*

*Lève*. In *Remorques* (directed by Jean Grémillon, 1939-41), he is the captain of his boat and the undisputed leader of his crew, but very much under the thumb of the company. *Le Tunnel* (directed by Curtis Bernhardt, 1933) also uses this double position and makes the hero portrayed by Gabin the buffer between his crew of workers and the superior (and antagonistic) interests of the transatlantic company.

### The All-Male Group: Regression and Class Identity

The discrepancy between the status of the hero within the group (community) and his lack of it on the wider social scene reveals an anomaly within patriarchal society. The hero and his friends form a world to themselves, a closed society; both he and his group are always 'doomed' to end tragically. This, depending on the genre of the film, has received a variety of explanations. If the star (Gabin) is addressed, the tragic destiny of the heroes he portrays is seen tautologically as part of his myth. In terms of the populism of *La Belle Equipe*, the phenomenon is usually interpreted as a pessimism which reflects contemporary moods and events. In a thriller (*Pépé le Moko*) it is seen as an intrinsic part of the genre: the rebel must die because he is inimical to the interests of society. One aspect which has been overlooked is the relationship between the insistence on an all-male group and the ending of these films.

Contrary to films in which the existence of an exclusively male group could be ascribed to war or the demands of an all-male institution, the narratives of *La Belle Equipe* and *Pépé le Moko* are set within a recognisable framework of everyday routine. Yet in these films, especially in *La Belle Equipe*, the male group tries to recreate a community cut off from real social relations and without women. Moreover, these male groups display the regressive features which are also characteristic of popular French comic genres of the 1930s such as the military vaudeville.

In the early café scene of *La Belle Equipe*, the group's team spirit is affirmed in finding Huguette's birthday present. The necessity for finding her a present arises out of guilt at forgetting and fear of disappointing her, a representing of the classic son-mother relationship (Huguette's maternal role will be reinforced later in the film by the short-lived part she takes in the team's work as their meal provider). As none of the friends has any money, they steal the contents of a slot machine in which cheap objects can be captured with the help of a remotely controlled arm. The operation has to be performed while trying to avert the eye of a father figure—the *patron* of the café (a similar structure is in evidence in the following scene; this time with the hotel manager, when Jean smuggles Mario into his bedroom). The men play at cheating the machine (and hence its owner); play at giving presents which are toys rather than real objects, Mario and Huguette play at getting married when the Wedding March comes out of the radio. These occurrences are part of a recurring motif of games and play that runs throughout *La Belle Equipe*, including Tintin's card trick with the woman customer in the café, the

*belote* game in the hotel, the dice as the major decorative motif in the country café and, of course, the lottery which provides the initial motivation for the narrative. The doomed fate of the co-operative which the friends set up is already inscribed in the café scene: Tintin's card trick fails and Charles announces that he is unlucky at cards.



Cheating the slot machine in *La Belle Equipe*.

But the fate of the co-op (and of Jean), like that of Pépé, cannot be so easily ascribed to bad luck. The regressive nature of the exclusively male group points all too clearly to its social inadequacy. Thus, if the Gabin films are at variance with the dominant form of Oedipal narrative common to many French films of the 1930s, in that their hero is not a father-figure, they can be seen as the reverse side of the coin: in not wanting to grow up and assume fathers' positions in a patriarchal society, these heroes are indeed doomed, having locked themselves in the untenable position of an unresolved Oedipal complex.

Within this framework, women are not excluded from the male group because they are inferior but, on the contrary, because in standing for the world of adult social relations—marriage, jobs, responsibilities—they represent a threat to the men's regressive desire for play. Displays of male superiority thus stand in a relation of over-compensation to the motivation behind the avoidance of women, namely fear. Having fun has to be divorced from women, as the heroes of René Clair's *À Nous la Liberté* (1931), walking away from the 'civilised' world, sing, 'those who, like us, want to take the roads must renounce marriage'. This refusal of women informs many Gabin films and, indeed, may be more widespread than usually recognised because it is often overlaid by different discourses. For example, we may want to reconsider some Renoir films in this light. Male fear of 'commitment' (represented by women) is hinted

at in the characters of the boatmen in *Partie de Campagne* (1936) and Octave in *La Règle du jeu* (1939), but most spectacularly in *Boudu sauvé des Eaux* (1932) in which Boudu, the ultimate regressive hero (who spreads shoe polish on lace curtains) jumps into the river rather than get married. In choosing to belong to an all-male group, the Gabin hero is positioned in a double bind, where women are marginalised (or rejected) to make room for relations between men, but where the classic patriarchal avenues are obstructed and the hero is, therefore, exposed to the threat of castration – a position which, in effect, echoes the dual nature of the classic Oedipal configuration.

What mediates the contradiction between the hero's assumed position of power within the group, and his powerlessness outside it, is the notion of *performance*. In *Pépé le Moko*, Pépé's superiority within his group of accomplices is constantly re-affirmed through rituals or in narcissistic re-affirmations of his power by asking all his men in turn to confirm the correctness of his opinion. In *La Belle Equipe*, the confirmation of his power takes the more direct form of actual performance (on the staircase, in the country café). In a larger sense, Gabin's acting, which is itself ritualistic (the explosion of violence), sustains this definition of working-class masculinity. His own performance, compared with that of his group of friends, produces an effect of understatement. This is of course the mark of the star, as opposed to character actors or actors belonging to different traditions, but the characteristics of Gabin's acting style also contribute to his definition of masculinity. Within the male/excess male paradigm that his films articulate, his performance always tends towards the 'degree zero' of masculinity present in the narrative: he is laconic where they are talkative, restrained in bodily movements where they gesticulate. The very moderation of his movements, magnified by close-ups and lighting, becomes the sign of its own restraint, the emblem of a self-contained, powerful masculinity, carrying the hint of its own violence, confirmed by the occasional outburst. But this display of masculinity remains just this, a *show*, for the diegetic as well as the cinema audience. Gabin's verbal and physical restraint become easily akin to paralysis. Pépé trapped in the Casbah. Jean sitting in the country café mourning Tintin, like François in his bedroom in *Le Jour se Lève*, are emblematic of the ultimate powerlessness of the Gabin hero vis-à-vis patriarchal forces.

Through their display of virile behaviour, the Gabin heroes and his groups of male friends in *La Belle Equipe* and *Pépé le Moko* embody the very contradictions of working-class masculinity in a patriarchal capitalist society. If women in these two films are the first victims of this system of values, in being punished, rejected or marginalised, the heroes are themselves trapped by their own absurd system. The tragic ending of these two films is, in the end, the tragedy of working-class masculinity, and the only logical narrative resolution within a patriarchal economy. Both films are, in this sense, classic narratives, in that the patriarchal order is restored by the death of the 'anti-hero' – who refuses to, or cannot, enter the symbolic order of the father or, on a more sociological

two friends try to preserve their project in spite of their quarrels over Charles' estranged wife Gina, but finally she destroys the friendship between the men and Jean kills Charles. An alternative ending was imposed by the producers, in which Jean and Charles turn their back on Gina, leaving their friendship triumphant. This is the version currently in distribution in Britain.

*Pépé le Moko*

Pépé is a notorious Parisian criminal, wanted by the police. He is in hiding in the Arab quarter of Algiers. Safe as long as he stays in the Casbah, he nevertheless yearns to escape and return to France. As he is pursuing his criminal activities from the Casbah with his group of acolytes, he is continually watched by police inspector Slimane. Attracted to a beautiful Parisian kept woman (Gaby), he is ready to leave his gipsy lover (Inès) and the Casbah and, against everybody's advice, follow Gaby to Paris. On attempting to do so, he is arrested by Slimane as the ship is still in the harbour. Watching the boat leave from the quay, Pépé commits suicide.

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Enquiries or submissions to: the Editor, *Screen*, 29 Old Compton Street, London W1V 5PL, England.

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Articles which are informed by current controversies in the study of national cinemas and Japanese film practice.

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Registration for participants from February 1, 1986.

Enquiries to: International Television Studies Conference, BFI Education, 81 Dean Street, London W1V 6AA, England. Telex: 27624.

# **THE OTHER CINEMA— A HISTORY: PART I, 1970-77**

**SYLVIA HARVEY INTERVIEWS  
TONY KIRKHOPE, PAUL MARRIS AND  
PETER SAINSBURY**

THE OTHER CINEMA is a distribution organisation based in London which has played an important role in the development and screening of experimental and radical film in Britain in the last fifteen years. It has not, of course, been the only institution contributing to this development, but an examination of its history through the recollections of those who have participated in its work provides a useful point of departure for the assessment of some of the concepts and practices of an 'alternative', 'radical' or 'independent' cinema. Such concepts have become a familiar part of the landscape of film studies in the last decade and now require some radical defamiliarisation, and a critical analysis of their possible significance and use for a decade of economic crisis. Confronted with the radical right-wing policies of a government purposefully creating mass unemployment, deliberately quickening the process of de-industrialisation and fundamentally eroding the provisions of the Welfare State, the counter-cultural ideas of the liberal and wealthy '60s seem now to be a generation and an era away. Since the emergence of the grotesque paradox of a 'radicalism' associated with the return to Victorian values, it becomes an imperative for those who wish to see radically egalitarian social change in Britain that we urgently reconstruct our understanding of what it is to 'be radical' and to act and organise in radical ways. This process of re-evaluation and reconstruction is necessary if we are to be able to assist in the development of those militant, combative and genuinely democratic forms of communication that have an important part to play in the socialist transformation of Britain. In particular, the middle-class basis of '60s radicalism and its elitist stance in relationship to working-class life and culture, as well as its inadequacies in respect of racial and sexual oppression, requires fundamental and critical re-evaluation.



We hope to develop some of these ideas further in the second part of this interview. Part One of the interview covers the period 1969-1977, and Part Two will cover the period from the late '70s to the present. The interviews in Part One were conducted with past and present members of the staff of the Other Cinema in London in July 1985; those contributing and their dates as employees of the Other Cinema are: Tony Kirkhope (1975-present), Paul Marris (1975-79) and Peter Sainsbury (1969-72). The Other Cinema opens its new cinema, the Metro, in London's West End in the autumn of 1985.

**Sylvia Harvey:** *Peter, how was the Other Cinema (TOC) founded and what were the kinds of events and activities that preceded it?*

**Peter Sainsbury:** In the spring or summer of 1969 a discussion was organised by Mo Teitelbaum at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) and various people involved in film – directors, producers, writers – were invited. They discussed the problems of distribution and exhibition and centred on two issues: one being the restrictive practices of the major importers and distributors of films (the exhibition duopoly already criticised in the report of the Monopolies Commission) which denied the possibility of a whole range of cinema being seen; the other, from the point of view of film-makers and producers, was the question of access to audiences beyond those which the marketing practices of the major circuits attracted.

The people at the conference included a range of individuals from the left of film and television production like Tony Garnett and Ken Loach of Kestrel Films, Ken Trodd and a left lawyer, Irving Teitelbaum, plus more liberal individuals like Albert Finney, Harold Pinter and people with a leftish history like Joe Losey coming from a quite different area of the industry. Also present was Lesley Elliot, whose father Curtis Elliot had set up Cinecenta, which at that time was seen as a radical innovation in the marketing and exhibition of contemporary art cinema – not the re-run of commercial films that they do now. This group of people decided to set up a company which would seek to establish a third circuit for film exhibition in England. Another key participant in the conference was the producer Otto Plashkes who had just produced *Events While Guarding the Bofors Gun*, based on a story that was extremely critical of the English military; the film introduced Jack Gold to cinema from television and offered one of the first starring roles to actors like David Warner and Nicol Williamson.

The strategy for the new organisation, which was initially called 'Parallel Cinema', was to try to link the independent cinemas into a centrally programmed circuit, in order to provide the audience that would justify the importation of a greater range of films, and also improve the exhibition profile of English films such as those produced by Losey and scripted by Pinter. It was a forerunner on the exhibition and distribution side of what was subsequently developed on the production side by the Association of Independent Producers (AIP).

*How did you come into this situation and what kinds of experiences did you bring?*

**Peter Sainsbury:** When this initial ICA conference was held I was an undergraduate student at the University of Essex, pursuing a course in sociology but also running the Film Society. Because Essex was a very young institution we were able to develop things from scratch, we weren't beholden to established traditions. So, with a fellow student, Simon Field, and helped by the radical political tenor of the university we were able to run an adventurous Film Society with a large audience. We ran a wide range of films from the Friday night western to American avant-garde and underground films and European art cinema. We had strong links with the London Arts Lab (from which the London Film-makers Co-op grew) and showed a programme of avant-garde films from the States—including work by Stan Brakhage—especially imported by the Arts Lab. This fertilised the whole debate about cinema at Essex, and partly because we were also involved in the student political movement, Essex was seen as a kind of recruiting ground by people such as those who had organised the ICA conference. So I was invited to apply as first organiser for 'Parallel Cinema'; I was subsequently given the job which I then discovered had no salary. That was in September 1969.

*Did the Arts Lab precede the London Film-makers' Co-op?*

**Peter Sainsbury:** Yes. There were a group of English and American film-makers resident in London who were running avant-garde cinema programmes in the basement of a Charing Cross Road bookshop called 'Better Books' in 1965-66, also publishing a magazine called *Cinim*. They were, through the Arts Lab, the founders of the London Film-makers Co-op in 1966-67. This was about a year before the first political film collectives like Cinema Action, and subsequently a split-off group called the Berwick Street Collective, were founded.

*Before we go on to 'Parallel Cinema' developments, can you say a bit more about the Essex context? What were people there reading and thinking and how did they relate or not relate to the Labour Party and Labour Government?*

**Peter Sainsbury:** At that time the Labour Party for us meant Harold Wilson and we weren't too enchanted with that. We were loosely aware of the left tradition of the Labour Party; but these were days of iconoclasm, of arrogance, of middle-class radicalism if you like, in which we saw ourselves as the champions of extra-parliamentary politics. We were not really concerned with the political establishment as it existed; we were more concerned with an intellectual tradition which we felt we'd discovered for ourselves, although of course we hadn't done any such thing. It was based around the Frankfurt School and its various spin-offs, around Marxist readings of literature and pre-Frankfurt School ideas

which we had garnered from being engrossed in existentialist writings – the work of Sartre and Camus. Sartre's *Problems of Method* was a treatise which sociologists among us took very seriously. In cinema terms it had nothing to do with the left tradition in British film-making. We began to wake up when we found experimenters, people who were interested in form. There were arguments about whether the poetic formalism of American New Cinema was of interest, or whether the more politicised, socially aware formalism of Godard was more important. These debates and disagreements were crystallised in the magazine *Afterimage* which I jointly founded with Simon Field in 1970.

*Would it be fair to say that at Essex along with an interest in the Marxism of the Frankfurt School there was quite an anarchistic strain in the philosophies that were circulating there?*

**Peter Sainsbury:** Yes. The Department of Sociology where I was a student had an almost entirely Marxist faculty, and literature was largely Marxist too. Also the art historian Tim Clark worked there and Charlie Posner lectured in politics. We were quite heavily immersed in all that, but there was also an anarchistic and hippy tradition; so there was a whole spectrum of ideas from quasi-Stalinist Marxism to anarchism. Some of the Essex undergraduates ended up in prison having been members of the Angry Brigade, some ended up in mental hospitals, some in well-paid jobs.

*You also mentioned the influence of contemporary American culture?*

**Peter Sainsbury:** There was this wonderful, charismatic and extremely eloquent visiting Professor of Poetry called Ed Dorn, who was very much a disciple of the American Beat Movement. So there was a conjunction of hippy ideas with memories of the Beat Generation, alongside the politicised student movement. There was also quite a strong drug culture, a strong poetic tradition and this overlapped with our interest in the American underground cinema; so there was an incredible melange of improbable ideas butting up against each other.

*What about the anti-Vietnam War movement? Was that a factor?*

**Peter Sainsbury:** Yes, a strong factor. We all had our heads bashed in Grosvenor Square over the anti-Vietnam war demonstrations there; it was a part of our general political persuasion. In the mid-sixties the neo-colonialist analysis was beginning to take a strong hold on the English left. I remember a wonderful article by an American sociologist called 'The Sociology of Underdevelopment and the Underdevelopment of Sociology'.

*I think you also mentioned, before, that as sociology students you were very critical of the American functionalist tradition. Could you say a bit about*

*this and how you related it to your ideas about film? This is a good ten years after John Osborne's **Look Back in Anger** and it seems to me that the anger of the late '60s was different.*

**Peter Sainsbury:** I think it was different. The anger of the sixties was an anger not just of people who thought their parents were complacent, but an anger of people who felt that reality itself was a mean, even disgusting, wholly unethical fabrication. So we were pitched into attacking not just events within the real world or power structures within the real world, but the whole notion of how the real world was constituted and spoken about. So it was much more a search for language, we were much more interested in a cinema which questioned the positing of reality as given. It was very easy for us to start attacking wholesale notions such as narrative cinema as if – and we were very naive about it – you could attack such a thing wholesale. We were against a sociology, a literature, a cinema, a government, a language which presented the world as a homogeneous, taken for granted, given entity, simply to be accepted. We were more interested in interrogating both what could be said about and what could be done in the world.

*How did 'Parallel Cinema', which subsequently became the Other Cinema, develop?*

**Peter Sainsbury:** Lesley Elliot, who had been involved with the ICA conference, gave me an office in Wardour Street, owned by Cinecenta. I used this for the first few months of my association with 'Parallel Cinema' and from here I tried to conduct research into the extent to which you could build some kind of third circuit with the existing independent cinemas. My view of it now (though retrospectively it's easy to say so) is that it was always a bit of a pipe dream. Firstly because the organisation that was setting itself up to run this circuit had no capital whatsoever, nor any realistic means of getting any with which to import films or to entice the independent cinemas; and the independent cinemas themselves were only willing to give up screening time when it was not wanted by themselves. So the whole thing was really not feasible.

*What replaced the quest for the third circuit?*

**Peter Sainsbury:** During the period when I was doing this initial research, the ICA cinema was being run by Nick Hart-Williams, and Nick must have been involved, at least as a spectator at that initial conference, since he was a member of the ICA staff at the time. The ICA cinema was notoriously difficult to run and Nick was getting fed up with it, so he proposed that he and I join together in an attempt to get something other than the third circuit idea together. The 'something other' was a distribution company which would attempt to establish its own exhibition arm. One of the English independent film-makers whose

work Nick had shown at the ICA was Peter Whitehead who loaned us a flat in Carlisle Street. So we moved out of the Cinecenta office into this flat where we lived and worked from early 1970, setting up what then became the Other Cinema. In mid-1972 we moved into the offices in Little Newport Street.

*What was the organisational form of the Other Cinema?*

**Peter Sainsbury:** Our accountant at that time was Michael Henshaw, who had also worked for a now defunct organisation called Centre 42, set up by Arnold Wesker in the Roundhouse. Centre 42 changed its name and became the Other Cinema.

*How did the broadly based group of people who had supported the setting up of 'Parallel Cinema' and subsequently TOC fragment?*

**Peter Sainsbury:** Some people like Losey and Pinter simply got too busy and weren't able to continue lending their time, energy and support. It was also obvious, although I don't think it was ever explicitly stated except in private, that the ideal of the third circuit wasn't going to happen; so people who were in the mainstream of the industry like Losey and Finney began to lose interest. There were other people who said: 'Now you have an organisation with a sense of direction, we as members of the Council of Management have legal responsibility but no power, so we cannot continue'. People like Garnett were very clear and absolutely straight about that decision.

*How did you begin to build TOC's collection of films?*

**Peter Sainsbury:** We decided to get hold of a few films that we thought needed distributing, including the work of Peter Whitehead and Godard's *British Sounds*, which had been produced by Irving Teitelbaum (associated with TOC and also a lawyer for Kestrel Films). *British Sounds* had been commissioned by Stella Richmond at London Weekend Television and shot partly at the University of Essex. Of course London Weekend refused to give it a television transmission, rather as French television had refused to show Godard's *Le Gai Savoir*.

*Was **British Sounds** the first Godard film in the TOC catalogue?*

**Peter Sainsbury:** I can't remember whether it preceded or succeeded *Le Gai Savoir*, which we acquired after it had been imported for screening at the ICA by Michael Kustow. So we had a film collection that steadily began to grow and that mirrored the tension apparent in the magazine *Afterimage* between a rather dour socialist enterprise on the one hand, and a rather opportunistic hippy enterprise on the other. The collection began to be noticed, and we started to organise screenings, firstly at a location called 'The Place' which was a ballet school off the

*Le Gai Savoir:*  
throwing 'open the  
question of reality  
and representation'.



Euston Road where we had two auditoria. We advertised in *Time Out* (a rough and ready broadsheet at that time costing, I think, 1/6d) and showed programmes of Straub, Rocha, Vertov and Godard.

*What did all this, and in particular the work of Godard, represent for you? Why were people working so hard to make available these kinds of films that were not taken up by any other distributor?*

**Peter Sainsbury:** I think the '60s Godard films did for us what certain books we encountered in our social philosophy course had done, which was to throw open the questions of reality and representation, to knock realism on the head, and to give us a whole new spurt of energy. You must also remember that the pre-'68 Godard had been taken up by other British distributors like *Connoisseur*. But it was especially easy for us to associate ourselves with Godard's own politicisation and the change in his films which took place between 1967 and 1969. There had also been a very influential season of Cuban films at the National Film Theatre in 1969, programmed by Andi Engel who is now, of course, through his company Artificial Eye, one of the most interesting importers and exhibitors of films in London. We were absolutely bowled over by the post-revolutionary Cuban films such as those by Santiago Alvarez, and by a whole range of new narrative forms developing in other Cuban films like *Memories of Underdevelopment*.

*What was it about the films that struck you – the visual language?*

**Peter Sainsbury:** It was the readiness to use any kind of visual language that might come to hand, and the supreme efficiency and economy of putting together a range of different kinds of political discourse out of materials which would not have been considered valid in the straightforward narrative art of British and American cinema.

**Peter Sainsbury:** He and Pam Engel ran an organisation called Politkino, which included some Latin American titles and the films of Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet. Politkino later merged for a while (before the founding of Artificial Eye) with TOC.

*After the screenings at the Place and before you left TOC in 1972, I think you organised screenings at a cinema in Kings Cross?*

**Peter Sainsbury:** Yes, with the help of Lesley Elliot, who put up the money to refurbish the building, we took over a defunct Odeon at Kings Cross. Nick Hart-Williams managed to chisel out of the Rank Organisation a print of *The Battle of Algiers*, which Rank had acquired in some job lot from Universal years previously; as a black and white, subtitled film they didn't feel inclined to show it. We knew of the reputation the film had gained on the continent and were very anxious to show it. So we opened it at the Odeon where it was a phenomenal success and ran for weeks. It was also our only real box office success; and we soon found ourselves having to share the Odeon premises with a soft-porn cinema. Soon after that we left and that was the end of that particular strategy of exhibition. Later, in the mid-seventies, screenings were organised in the Collegiate Theatre of University College, London.

*How were the Third World films acquired? This is also really a question about the cultural identity of TOC.*

**Peter Sainsbury:** I think it was in 1970 that we were invited by Lynda Myles to programme a week during the Edinburgh Film Festival in one



*Memories of Underdevelopment: 'a whole range of new narrative forms developing in other Cuban films'.*

*Hour of the Furnaces:*  
 'In taking on the  
 Latin American  
 political cinema we  
 were providing  
 something no one  
 else could offer'.



of the small cinemas in Edinburgh. We were delighted to do this, but knew that we didn't have a convincing bunch of films. So we pulled together an air fare to Paris, and I went and met some of the people who we knew to be distributing Third World cinema there. Effectively we borrowed the prints for this Edinburgh Festival screening, and then one way or another cudgelled together the cash to keep them in distribution here; this would include films like *Blood of the Condor* and probably most important the first part of *Hour of the Furnaces*. In taking on the Latin American political cinema we were providing something which no one else could offer, and at a time when various new groups and organisations were taking on 16mm non-theatrical exhibition outside the traditional film society circles. The users of film began to proliferate.

*Who used the TOC films?*

**Peter Sainsbury:** Some were the more conventional film societies; but in the early '70s there was a growing radical audience in the universities. And there were the new kinds of users who didn't meet primarily around film but around socialist or Third World issues in order to discuss anti-colonialist, anti-nuclear and anti-imperialist ideas. Some were meeting around feminist issues, and the women's movement was emerging at about the same time as TOC, though they probably weren't renting films until the early '70s. So, these films were mostly used by student societies, but gradually the educational bookings for film study and other courses increased.

*You left TOC as a full-time worker in 1972, although I think you continued your involvement with the Council of Management for a while?*



**Peter Sainsbury:** Yes. Also from the mid-seventies a number of new people joined the Council including Marc Karlin and James Scott from the Berwick Street Collective, and Laura Mulvey.

*Tony and Paul, what did you see as the cultural identity of TOC when you joined it.*

**Tony Kirkhope:** I arrived in late 1975 and the major focus of the collection was the Latin American material. Though for those of us who came into TOC in the '75 period (myself, Paul Marris and Charles Rubenstein) the political and aesthetic programme that the Godard films announced was very significant. TOC at that time was poor and had just been bailed out by the BFI with a one-off £10,000 grant to cover three years of accumulated deficits; there was no money for expansion and the Council of Management had placed a temporary moratorium on further acquisition of films. I started to work at TOC part-time, and found that the image it had from the outside was quite different from the experience of being inside. The inside view demonstrated an organisation that had run its course of being alternative and had financially almost collapsed; staff morale wasn't very good and you felt as though you were working at the end of an era in cramped, uncomfortable, low-paid conditions – that whole legacy of alternativeness was really brought home. The only real strength of the organisation was the Latin American material and the link with the Chile Solidarity Campaign; two members of the TOC staff, Patsy Nightingale and Adrian Cooper, sat on the Executive Committee of the Solidarity Campaign, and an immense amount of activity was generated around the use of campaigning documentaries. Perhaps most important were the plans to open a new cinema which gave a lift to the whole project.

**Paul Marris:** In 1975 when TOC advertised a full-time post as programmer for the planned new cinema I applied for and got the job. I'd had a background of being quite politically active when I was in college, and I'd been studying for a diploma in Film Studies at the Slade School of Fine Art, University of London, and done some ushering for the Collegiate Cinema screenings; TOC was very much a focal pole of attraction at that time for those of us with a dual interest in film culture and socialist politics. 1975 was also the year of the famous black-fronted catalogue that consolidated the image of TOC for some time. This was the first time there had been a film catalogue that was so thoroughly documented, and it owed a lot to the editing work of Pam Engel and the design of Oscar Zarate. But one thing I should also say is that one of the things that particularly struck me when I arrived at TOC was the absolute lack of engagement with the relationship between film material and the Labour Movement.

*What were your money-earning titles?*

**Tony Kirkhope:** There were three films in particular that we owned

and had had very successful theatrical exposure: *Punishment Park*, *Themroc* and *Bof*. In many ways these cross-subsidised the other material in our collection, especially the English films. *Tout Va Bien* and *Harlan County* were also very successful and, later, *Rosie the Riveter*. *Z* and *State of Siege*, which we picked up after they'd been run theatrically, were also very significant financially.

*How do you explain the presence in the collection of films with such widely differing cultural and political resonances?*

**Tony Kirkhope:** TOC has always had a quite pluralist acquisitions policy, from the European avant-garde to the campaigning documentary. Different members of staff have developed different areas of the collection. So, for example, Nick Hart-Williams who up to 1977 was one of the principal people behind the acquisitions policy, was keen on films like *Themroc* and *Bof* which he thought had a wide audience profile, and Adrian Cooper developed the Latin American collection.

*What was the relationship between TOC and the developing British independent film culture?*

**Paul Marris:** At the same time as I joined TOC I went onto a planning committee which was organising the first major annual conference of the Independent Filmmakers Association (IFA); the conference was subsequently held in the spring of 1976. Together a group of us (including Marc Karlin, Claire Johnston, representatives from Cinema Action, Diane Tammes and Deke Dusinberre) wrote what became the founding



*Punishment Park:*  
'Successful theatrical  
exposure (which)  
cross-subsidised the  
other material'.

policy paper of the IFA. Also at that time people active in the independent film movement like David Hopkins, Steve Dwoskin, Laura Mulvey, Marc Karlin and James Scott joined the TOC Council of Management. Through people like this and a little later through someone like Peter Sylveire, who worked at TOC and was also national secretary of the IFA, close links with the independent film movement were established. This was also the period when the Association of Independent Producers (AIP) was founded as a distinct organisation. Initially when Simon Hartog had called the first meetings of the IFA in 1974 in NFT 3, the span of interest that would later separate out into the IFA and the AIP were all jointly meeting. The aesthetic programme outlined in the policy paper of the first IFA conference signals the rise of what we came to know in the late '70s as the independent film movement.

*Maybe we should note here that the other distribution wings for the independent movement at that time were the London Film-makers Co-op and the BFI Production Department. This is the period before the development of separate women's distribution organisations (although the London Women's Film Group had done some distribution work, and the women's Film Co-op in Sheffield was founded in 1975).*

**Paul Marris:** We should also mention the distribution work of ETV, Concord, Cinema Action and Liberation Films.

*The mid-seventies is also an important period for developments at the Royal College of Art Film School. Who were some of the people who were to become active within the independent film movement who had been students at the RCA?*

**Paul Marris:** On the staff were Steve Dwoskin and Peter Gidal. And three or four generations came through there, particularly associated with the time when Stuart Hood was Professor. There was the generation that included Keith Griffiths, the Quaij twins, Anna Ambrose (who died in 1985) and Richard Woolley. Then there's a later generation associated with Film Work Group, Clive Myer and Nigel Perkins, and former members of the group, Stewart MacKinnon (now in Trade Films, Newcastle-upon-Tyne), Ed Bennett and Phil Mulloy. A still later generation included Anne Cottringer, Marion Dain, Sue Clayton, Jonathan Collinson, Bernard Morales, Ieuan Morris, Ron Moulé, Jan Worth, Chris Reeves and Benedict Mason.

*What were TOC's contractual and financial relationships with film-makers?*

**Tony Kirkhope:** There were only two deals offered: the 60/40 deal or the 50/50 deal. Either we paid 60% of royalties earned if the film-maker supplied a subtitled print, or we split income 50/50 if we had to purchase the print ourselves. Within that set-up we could always take on films and

make them available through the TOC library without a large promotional push, if we wished and if the film-maker understood the situation.

*Do you think that film-makers, either British or foreign, had unreasonable expectations of what TOC could offer them either culturally or economically?*

**Tony Kirkhope:** American independents were always astonished at how little money there was to be earned from the British independent market, partly because they were used to large sales of prints to college libraries, which doesn't happen here. The real problem is that Britain represents a quite small and difficult market at the best of times in the art house sector; if you're dealing with the marginal end of that sector then the situation is much worse. Typically the overall percentage that might go back to the producer is very small; the producer might see around 18p out of every £3 ticket. On a cinema seat you take off VAT, then up to 1985 you had to take off the Eady Levy on theatrical exhibition; then usually it's only 25-30% that is returned to the distributor. The distributor is usually splitting that 50/50 with the producer, but only after first recouping the money advanced on prints, subtitling, copy costs, promotion and advertising.

*How and why did TOC open its own cinema in Tottenham Street in October 1976?*

**Paul Marris:** The desire to have a cinema had been there for about five years, and TOC finally had the chance of putting it into practice with the opportunity to develop what was then an empty concrete shell underneath a new office block development on the corner of Charlotte Street and Tottenham Street. It was an interesting place because in the past on that site, though not in that building, the descendent of Ivor Montagu's London Film Society had used the Scala Theatre, as it then was, for its regular Sunday evening showings in the '40s, I think. When TOC closed its cinema in December 1977 its immediate successor in the building was also called the Scala Cinema, backed by Virgin capital and run by one of the former managers of the Other Cinema, Steve Woolley. Today the whole building is the headquarters of Channel Four TV.

*How did TOC raise the money to open the cinema?*

**Tony Kirkhope:** We estimated that the cinema would cost £35,000. If we could raise half of this the BFI offered to match the other half with a grant of £17,500; this gave the BFI access to a central London screen where, among other things, it could open its own Production Board films. We aimed to raise the money to cover the capital costs, together with an extra £10,000 to cover any losses in the first year of operation and a further £5,000 for a publicity campaign, the purchase of prints and

so forth. However, we failed to raise the full amount required – the total project costs finally came in at around £45,000-£50,000. So even with the BFI grant there was a capital shortage when the doors opened. TOC's distribution side provided about £20,000 of the shortfall; but it could only do this (and continue to buy new films for the cinema) by using some of the royalties that were owed to film-makers. In terms of the running costs of the cinema in its first year, it did lose £10,000, which is a very small sum for a new venture, and could be seen as rather a success. However, the capital costs problem proved insurmountable, and when an attempt at raising additional money from the BFI failed, and the cinema was closed after 15 months of quite successful operation, this left TOC distribution with enormous debts to film-makers.

*Can you describe the design and facilities of the cinema and its programming policy?*

**Paul Marris:** We had an auditorium of 300 seats and a screen that could take a wide variety of formats, so that material could be drawn from all periods of the history of cinema, in all screen formats. We were equipped with 16mm and 35mm projectors and had access to double-band projection; there was also a booth next to the projection box with a PA system into the auditorium, so that voice-over translations could be done of non-subtitled material if visiting foreign film-makers were over. By the auditorium was a clubroom with a bar where meetings and discussions could be held and, occasionally, ancillary 16mm screenings. The comparative flexibility of the building as we designed it indicated that we wanted to offer something more than conventional theatrical exhibition.

Our programming format was to open a first run feature each month usually – that would run at 9pm every night of the week. Earlier on weekday nights we would run other material, sometimes seasons, sometimes repping, sometimes historical material, and regularly once a week we screened work by a new, young British independent film-maker. On early Saturday evenings we usually rented out the cinema at cost price to a campaigning organisation that wanted to run a benefit of some kind; we would provide the cinema and staff, integrate it into the publicity and help to choose the appropriate film. On Sunday afternoon and early evening we cleared a large space of time for a film plus event, including speakers and time for discussion. At one point we did something that was then quite innovative and ran a summertime season with an organisation that pre-figured 'Rock Against Racism' called 'Music for Socialism'; on Sunday afternoons we would run a film and have a live band; we offered a variety of music including, for example, a rock and roll slot with a performance by Shakin' Stevens and a screening of Tashlin's *The Girl Can't Help It*. Many Sundays we would be turning people away; we'd fill 300 seats and these events were probably the single most successful identifiable element within the programme.

*That sounds quite original; so you created a new market there?*

**Paul Marris:** Yes. Though some of the programming ideas were not exactly novel; we would do retrospectives of directors who we thought had made a major contribution to cinema from a socialist point of view, for example, Eisenstein and Francesco Rosi. Sometimes the seasons would be along national lines which is a comparatively conventional form of programming that the NFT had been doing for years; though we would select the societies that we were particularly interested in. So we had retrospectives of new Cuban cinema and of Chilean cinema. Some of the programming ideas around a theme were novel; this example was subsequently taken up elsewhere, for example in the NFT seasons on 'Images of Alcoholism' and on the representation of prisons, where you take a topic and see how it's been represented. As far as I know this was a pioneering method that we developed. So, for example, we did a season on 'Women and Work: Waged and Unwaged' and another built around Eric Hobsbawm's book on social banditry which included Rosi's *Salvatore Giuliano*, Spielberg's *Sugarland Express*, Curtiz' *Adventures of Robin Hood* and so on. We knew that we had to make each individual screening attractive to an audience, but we also tried to build up connections between different types of films in a season, and to open up possibilities and new meanings for our audiences. We also took some chances and programmed feature-length documentaries, including Joris Ivens' multi-part documentary on China, *How Yukong Moved the Mountains*. It was an adventurous thing to do and fortunately very successful.

*I think your audience was generally middle-class. Did you make any attempt at changing that?*

**Paul Marris:** The only time that any significant working-class audience came into the cinema was if there was an event organised by a campaigning organisation that had credibility; and then it wasn't a popular working-class audience, but one of activists who were interested in particular campaigns. One thing I'll always remember is that during the Grunwick strike the Poster Film Collective would bring in the rushes of the day's events up at the Grunwick picket line, shot from the standpoint of engaged camera people, and show them each night before the main feature. In terms of real work with working-class audiences, to even give yourself a start, if you're not in a working-class neighbourhood, then the West End is the place to be because that's acknowledged as the entertainment district, that's where you go for a night out, and quite rightly that's what people look for when they get leisure time. Secondly, it's likely that you're going to be working with audiences convened by politically or socially active organisations; thirdly, any impact that you are going to make in working-class organisations or neighbourhoods is likely to be through that mediating layer of organisers, activists, educationalists, who will themselves be looking for political and cultural ideas consciously, across the range of cultural



*How Yukong Moved the Mountains: 'an adventurous thing to do and fortunately very successful'.*

provision within the metropolis, and then be taking those ideas into their neighbourhoods and organisations.

*What do you think was learned from these experiments in progressive West End programming?*

**Paul Marris:** Our main disadvantage was in having only one auditorium and in showing different films on the same day, which confused audiences used to continuous performances at conventional first-run feature cinemas. The need for two auditoria is a lesson that has subsequently been learned in London at the ICA and at Film House in Edinburgh, at Watershed in Bristol and at the new Manchester film centre.

*Do you think the Tottenham Street cinema could have worked outside London?*

**Tony Kirkhope:** I think that compared with other cities we benefited massively from being in London and in the West End, which is the entertainment and leisure district serving an eight million population city, and a whole area of the Southeast beyond it. It is an art house enclave with its inner city ring of the young, mobile, middle-class *Time Out* audiences. We also benefited from *Time Out* publicity and the kind of national press coverage that you can get for first-run releases. We could also take advantage more speedily of visiting film-makers who are extremely likely to visit London if they visit any city in Britain. It was also important to the economics of the cinema that we were able to draw a tourist audience in the otherwise slack summer months. So, for a whole

range of reasons, it is easier to run a project of that kind in London, and it might even be possible to run it without subsidy.

*How did the campaign develop in response to the threat of closure of the cinema?*

**Tony Kirkhope:** We went public with financial appeals in about September of 1977, and Marc Karlin made a film for us which was broadcast later on the BBC's *Open Door* slot. But the main aim of the campaign was to get the BFI to make up the missing capital. In November we asked the BFI for £50,000 to cover the initial capital shortfall, plus some of the subsequent losses, and some subsidy towards the following year's activity. The Board of Governors turned down the application—despite the public demonstration outside—and it was then a matter of formally moving towards liquidation in December of that year; I think the cinema was finally wound up in January 1978.

I'm not sure, in retrospect, that a public campaign was the best way of solving the problems we then faced. Public support had been one of our strengths and in running the cinema to some extent we'd relied on volunteers who had put in long hours of unpaid labour because they supported the project and wanted to see it flourish; there was a not-so-hidden subsidy there, and we owe a great debt to all the people who did that. But when it came to the 'Save the Other Cinema' campaign, the BFI felt they'd had the wool pulled over their eyes about the funds that had originally been raised to meet the matching monies grant, and they were unhappy with the internal organisation, the systems of accountability and control within TOC. There were reasons for this since, internally, a period of confusion about the decision-making process followed the departure of the person who had been seen as central to launching the project under-capitalised. I suspect that, from outside, the internal administrative and financial problems appeared insoluble, although in my view they were not, and a major opportunity was lost.

*Peter, you left TOC in 1972, and after working for the BBC for a while became Head of Production at the BFI, a job which you left this year. How did you perceive the situation from inside the BFI at that time?*

**Peter Sainsbury:** Internally the Institute was divided as to how to respond to the TOC grant request. On the left of the BFI Executive Committee there was agreement on the principle of additional financial support, but we were divided on how to do it: some wanted to implant a specific policy and set of guidelines upon TOC, others wanted a clear 'arms length' subsidy approach. But when it became clear to the Directorate that the problems weren't just those of day-to-day running costs but of an accumulated capital deficit, it became impossible to do anything.

*This was a period of Labour Government. Were there any attempts to lobby*



*people politically higher up, or to attempt to contact the Labour Arts Minister? Or was there any attempt at raising matching monies from the local State? In other cities Regional Film Theatres were raising matching money from their local city authorities.*

**Paul Marris:** I don't think the campaign went any further than the BFI Board of Governors.

**Tony Kirkhope:** It was one of the evident lessons of the fund-raising campaign that you cannot raise sufficient sums for this kind of project by individual public subscriptions. Also you must remember that the Greater London Council (GLC) was at that time under the control of the Conservatives, led by Horace Cutler. Today obviously we hope that the Local Authority can play a role in helping to get new exhibition projects off the ground. In 1976 we did get some small assistance from our local borough authority, Camden, which made some concessions on the rates. The question of why we didn't then get more support from the local State reveals major changes in the politics of cultural funding during the last decade. The principle agency in London has been the GLC, which over the last two or three years has massively increased arts spending and is now marked out for abolition by the Conservative Government in spring 1986.

*What do you think was lost with the closure of the cinema in 1977?*

**Peter Sainsbury:** It was the only place where we could successfully show and promote BFI produced films. It was creating audiences for these and other films through its programming policy, and it was producing a lively social context for debate about the films.

**Paul Marris:** Something crucial was lost for British independent cinema. The space that we were developing would have been perfect for the emergence of a certain kind of comparatively low-budget independent fiction feature in Britain. It would have been the perfect place to open it, to gain press coverage and to influence its use and showings elsewhere throughout Britain. It could have fundamentally altered the trajectory in subsequent years of the kind of funding that the BFI Production Board was able to pursue. The absence of that space has had damaging cultural consequences for the past decade.

Part Two of this interview will appear in one of the 1986 (volume 27) issues of *Screen*.

# DISTRIBUTING 'A QUESTION OF SILENCE'

A CAUTIONARY TALE

BY JANE ROOT

Three women, strangers to each other, are browsing in a boutique. One, a down-trodden housewife with a toddler in a pushchair, slips a blouse into her shopping bag. The male proprietor of the shop sees her and smugly replaces the garment. As he does so the other two women begin ostentatiously shop-lifting themselves. One slaps the manager round the face. The others move towards him armed with coathangers and heavy glass ashtrays....

*A Question of Silence* (directed by Marleen Gorris, 1982) was a film which dramatically divided audiences. Some women stood up and cheered, while other (often male) viewers left enraged. Female viewers frequently described it as a celebration of gut-level female solidarity and an allegorical tragi-comedy about male society: men, meanwhile, tended to see it as a serious 'social problem' picture or a shocking and disturbing attack on them as individuals. I was told that the Pizza Hut restaurant next door to one of the cinemas was full, night after night, with couples engaged in deep and sometimes angry arguments about the film. Three years later, the film is still a *cause célèbre*, referred to in some reviews to lure audiences and mentioned disparagingly in others as an example of – shockingly uncontrolled feminism.

The aim of this article is not to give another reading of this much-discussed film or to investigate why men and women responded to it so differently. Instead, I want to offer a personal, tentative account of how the strategies used by the feminist distribution company, Cinema of

Women, might have influenced the way *A Question of Silence* was received.

The part distributors play in the circulation of films is usually hidden from view, their role rarely discussed outside the industry. In fact, they are a vital link in the chain between film production and audiences. It is distributors who decide what can be shown where and distributors who make crucial decisions about a film's public profile: decisions which irrevocably affect the way a film is seen. Distributors' ideas about marketing shape the expectations an audience has as it enters a cinema – expectations which, as we all know, directly affect the pleasure or irritation gained from a film. More abstractly, the range of interpretations easily available to the rowing couples in the Pizza Hut are also a result of the different elements that make up a film's 'opening' – from critical reviews to distributor's decisions about cinemas, poster images, interviews of directors and actors, festival entries, advertising budgets and slogans. But, perhaps most important of all from a feminist point of view, distribution strategies directly affect *who* makes up the audience for any particular film.

This article is therefore an investigation of the complicated web of institutionalised images, vested interests, good intentions and arguments which surrounded the commercial release of *A Question of Silence*. This, I hope, will reveal something of the part distribution plays in the circulation and reception of all films, and also indicate some of the issues associated with

distribution which particularly affect feminist film: issues which need to be properly confronted if feminist films are to reach the audiences they deserve.

### Cinema of Women

Cinema of Women, *A Question of Silence's* British distributor, is a collectively-run feminist company. It was set up five years ago to promote and circulate films (and more recently videos) directed by women which, in the words of its rather all-embracing constitution, 'speak from or about the position of women'. The films and videos themselves range from direct campaign-oriented work such as *Bitter Wages* on workplace health hazards to more complex theoretical work such as *Thriller* and *Daughter Rite*. I have been involved with Cinema of Women for four years, originally as a paid employee, now as a voluntary collective member.

On first viewing, *A Question of Silence* excited the collective for the same reasons it made cinema audiences cheer: its fresh combination of provocative politics and knowing humour about the everyday substance of women's lives. We were warmed by its central theme of unspoken female solidarity, and enjoyed the way that it gave serious attention to a whole range of feminist concerns—marriage, sexuality, job opportunities, age, childcare—without ever feeling like a lecture. At the same time, as distributors, we were also impressed by it as a feminist film with the potential to touch women outside the inevitably limited festival/women's group circuit. Here was a feature which might conceivably run for an extended period at a 'proper' cinema, something which delighted us as women linked by a love of the experience of cinema as well as a commitment to feminism. In retrospect, it offered us our biggest chance to date to try for a goal we all silently shared: to tap the vast and subversive potential of providing pleasurable experiences for specifically female cinema-goers.

*A Question of Silence* also meant, however, investing financially on a level we were unused to, directly confronting the workings and requirements of the commercial film world (albeit its independent end) and dealing with agents, cinema owners and critics, groups of

people who (with a few notable exceptions, such as Liz Wren at London's Everyman Cinema) had not been overwhelmingly friendly towards Cinema of Women in the past. Although, for instance, Marleen Gorris, the Dutch director of *A Question of Silence*, wanted Cinema of Women to distribute her film, we had to negotiate for it with her producer, Matthijs van Heijningen, and his British agent, Don Getz, both men with generalised interests in many different sectors of the film industry. Their decision to give it to us was made by comparing our deal (a combination of advance money, 'opening' cinemas and publicity budget—the finance borrowed in part from the British Film Institute) with those offered by other distributors, rather than because of any interest in us as a feminist company. In retrospect we were undoubtedly walking on thin ice. If, at that early stage, we had taken a pessimistic view of the situation, the issue might have seemed whether we were going to either bankrupt the company or be trapped into compromising the principles which had brought us into film distribution in the first place.

### Art Cinema

When the time came for British journalists to interview Marleen Gorris, several were surprised by her insistence that it had not been difficult to get the money to make the film, despite her politics and lack of experience as a director. Indeed, some writers were so bewildered by this that they disregarded her comments and wrote stories about her 'struggle' to make the film regardless.

In fact, like *Coup de foudre*, *Friends and Husbands* and so many other European women's films, *A Question of Silence* was the product of a highly government-subsidised film industry, in this case the Dutch. Although the historical circumstances in different 'subsidising' countries vary considerably, Steve Neale has suggested that they are linked by a common political need to maintain a local film culture capable of disrupting Hollywood's potential domination. Accordingly, the very diverse films funded by these subsidies are linked by their proud assertion of *difference* from mainstream American films: the trademarks of which often include a prioritisation of visual elements and interior life

60 over Hollywood-style narrative and action. Most centrally these films are seen as *art* rather than entertainment, a definition underlined by the way they tend to circulate as the 'unique personal visions' of supremely inspired individuals, rather than as generic, industrial products.

If what is commonly described as 'art cinema' developed in opposition to Hollywood, then many British independent practices are *against* art cinema: and, in particular, the elitism which tends to go hand-in-hand with understandings of cinema as high art. While the Cinema of Women collective, for instance, rarely had time to discuss the future of feminist film in abstract terms, there was an implicit feeling that the cinema we were aiming for would somehow combine the politics of agit-prop with the popularist pleasures of Hollywood rather than self-consciously define itself as art.

Despite such qualms, political groups have had to acknowledge that the institution of 'art cinema' has allowed a whole range of political films from *Weekend* to *The German Sisters* to be completed and circulated (comparatively) widely. As Steve Neale points out, 'Art Cinema has, historically, provided real – if limited – spaces for genuinely radical work...'. It is a definition which clearly includes *A Question of Silence*, a film which despite its explicit political purpose, is nevertheless placed firmly within most definitions of 'art cinema' by its funding, acting, music, photography and narrative features such as the central, interior conflict of the psychiatrist. Neale continues his discussion by saying, however, that 'the impact of that (radical) work has often been blocked and nullified by the overall institutional contexts in which it has found itself'.<sup>1</sup> The problem for Cinema of Women was to find a way to distribute *A Question of Silence* that prevented this from happening.

### Not Art Cinema

Only a distribution strategy which set out to single-mindedly misrepresent the content of the film could have obliterated the marks of art

cinema from the public profile of *A Question of Silence*. Since Cinema of Women had been started partly in order to stop feminist films being marketed in an unrepresentative way we had little desire to do this. And, in any case, we knew such campaigns are almost always counter-productive. Unless you are a beleaguered major using the last ditch strategy of swamping cinemas with a particularly hopeless film, advertising heavily and hoping to make money before the bad news gets around, there is no sense in making an audience think they are going to get something they will not.

Another, equally drastic, solution involves changing the film itself by dubbing the voices. A major characteristic of art cinema's 'difference from Hollywood' is the use of non-English languages. When screened in Britain the subtitles key into a deep, institutionalised, conflict about whether Britain is part of 'mass' 'entertainment-oriented' American society, or linked to older, more 'artistic' European traditions. Subtitles become seen as the mark of 'serious art' and the anathema of entertainment to the extent that the phrase 'subtitled film' operates almost as a genre-description. When these resonances are added to the fact that the skill of rapidly reading subtitles cannot be assumed to be possessed by all of the potential audience for women's films, dubbing begins to become a serious option. In dealing with *A Question of Silence* it was, however, far too expensive for us to contemplate. But, given more capital and the possibility of, say, a circuit release, we might have committed what is usually seen as the ultimate heresy in art cinema circles.

A more realistic way forward involved the construction of a marketing image which placed the art cinema elements in a context that suggested the subversive pleasures we perceived in the film. Our campaign therefore had to do two jobs: to sell enough tickets to cover our costs and to attract viewers, particularly women, who might have missed the special attractions of *A Question of Silence* if it had been marketed simply as art cinema. We would not have been happy if *A Question of Silence* had been received in the same way as *Coup de foudre*: that is to say if it had been a commercial success by disguising its particularly female pleasures under a cloak of art cinema respectability.

In detail, the components of our campaign were –

<sup>1</sup> Steve Neale, 'Art Cinema as Institution', *Screen* vol 22 no 1, 1981, pp 11-39.

**Cinema choice:** The strongly metropolitan bias of British film culture makes a London opening central to any commercial film campaign. First-run cinemas have very distinct images attached to them, images which inevitably colour perceptions of the films that open there. In London the Camden Plaza, Curzon, Screen on the Hill and Academy all have the reputation of showing art cinema – the latter venue (where *Coup de foudre* opened) carefully underlining this by using posters with ‘arty’ woodcuts rather than photographic designs. Despite their potentially higher revenue, none of these was our first choice. Instead, we were keen to open *A Question of Silence* simultaneously at the North London Screen on the Green and the now defunct Southwest London Paris Pullman. To us, the Screen on the Green seemed perfectly poised between definitions of art and entertainment, showing a combination of mainstream releases, especially those associated with the art cinema influenced ‘movie brat’ American directors, the occasional political film, music-related features and cult titles such as *Eraserhead*. Interestingly in this context, these last two categories represent the only genres other than the government-subsidised art cinema in which independent film-

makers can get finance to make widely shown films.

**The film’s title:** I have already commented on the defining nature of foreign language; the use of foreign titles is a further, and perhaps particularly pretentious way of categorising a film as art. Along with its US distributors, we changed the title from *De Stilte Rond Christina M.* to *A Question of Silence*.

**Posters and Advertisements:** It was important to us that we marketed *A Question of Silence* as an enjoyable experience for women viewers in general – both those who would describe themselves as feminists and those who might be more wary of the phrase. Early designer’s drafts for the poster and advertising image based around themes of imprisonment and violence were rejected in favour of an image based on the cathartic moment at the end of the film where the male legal system is literally laughed out of court. Our ‘laughing women’ poster also contravened some of the rather po-faced conventions of marketing art cinema, which tend to downplay the humour in order to sell more intellectually ‘important’ activities. The poster places the women alongside the slogan ‘They had never met before but they agreed to kill together’, creating a series of



enigmas which are a feature of the marketing of the majority of entertainment films. Were the women the killers? Why were they laughing if they had just done a murder? Why did they kill with strangers?<sup>2</sup> At the same time the slogan emphasises the generic themes of murder and detection, clearly suggesting that *A Question of Silence* can be seen in relation to other thrillers. Or, at least, that thrillers are one point of reference among many: the art cinema origins of the films and our own ambivalence are signalled by the amount of space allowed for the festival prizes the film has won, a classic indicator of art cinema 'quality'. We were, however, certain that we wanted *A Question of Silence* to be seen primarily in the context of *film*, and not more respectable literary forms which are frequently referenced by art cinema.

**Feminism:** Our keenness that *A Question of Silence* be perceived as a women's film, made by a woman particularly for women, meant that we made an effort to publicise it to specifically feminist audiences through a variety of channels not normally considered by (or available to) other distributors such as *Spare Rib*, the *London Women's Liberation Newsletter* and the newsletter of the Women's Resource and Research Centre, now the Feminist Library. Part of this work involved publicising the feminist nature of the Cinema of Women collective, hoping that the resonances created by this would adhere to films which had our name on them. This strategy of trying to create a strong, recognisable image for the distributor has been tried by only a few other UK companies, notably Palace Pictures.

### The Critics

Our certainty about the importance of *A Question of Silence*, the positive responses we gained when we showed it privately and the prizes that it continued to win made us feel reasonably confident about its release. In fact, by

the end of the first week the audience figures were so low it looked in danger of sinking without trace.

Without doubt, we had drastically underestimated the extent to which male critics (who vastly outnumber women in the British press) would perceive the film as a threat. This was nowhere more evident than in Milton Shulman's *Standard* review, which claimed that the film's resolution 'is an argument that would have justified the Nazis' exterminating Jews, Herod's slaughter of babies and the lynching of blacks'. He continued: 'Genocide is a comparatively modest moral device compared to the ultimate logic of this film's message.'<sup>3</sup> Shulman's near-hysterical comments were the most virulently expressed, but the sentiments were not limited to the *Standard*. John Coleman of the *New Statesman*'s total review amounted to a comment that the film 'tries to catch my gender in a Catch-22. To hell with it'<sup>4</sup>, while Philip French in the *Observer* maintained that the film was 'inherently stupid', the 'unacceptable face of feminism' and 'in no fruitful sense provocative'<sup>5</sup>.

Shulman and French seemed particularly angered by the way the film had been presented. French writes disparagingly of the 'fashionable cinemas' exhibiting the film, while Shulman begins his review by saying that *A Question of Silence* 'boasts of its feminist origins as if they were battle honours'. Since the film itself studiously avoids a feminist milieu, it is clear that he is referring to the advertising campaign. Would their responses have been different if the film had been distributed by an established art cinema distributor such as Artificial Eye and had been unambiguously marketed as an art movie?

Obviously, distributors never encourage critics to make vitriolic attacks, but the damage done by such reviews can be less than that inflicted by those who damn with faint praise. Particularly harmful were the reviews which dismissed the film in the few lines normally reserved for soft porn and children's fare, using terms which made it seem a rather peculiar little piece of art cinema. Tim Pulleine, writing in the *Guardian*, noted briefly that the film's 'insights are not fused by the structural design into a compelling whole' and that it 'fails to find a narrative convention capable of converting special pleading into polemic whole'.<sup>6</sup> And, for the *Financial Times* it was 'a pancake flat fable on

<sup>2</sup> See John Ellis' discussion of film slogans in *Visible Fictions*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983, pp 31-35.

<sup>3</sup> The *Standard*, February 17, 1983, p 23.

<sup>4</sup> The *New Statesman*, February 25, 1983, p 28.

<sup>5</sup> The *Observer*, February 20, 1983, p 30.

feminism with a few interesting twitches early on'.<sup>7</sup>

It might almost be said that in a perverse way Shulman and French had appreciated *A Question of Silence*: their responses (primed, perhaps, by our publicity campaign) came from an alarmed reading of the potentially disturbing implications of the film for men. They did not review it in the context of art cinema: for them it was a political film through and through. The same was not true for a larger and (on this film) possibly more influential group of critics. Not only were comments on the substantial political issues raised in the film missing from their accounts, but they also failed to be either shocked or appreciative of the political daring suggested by film-making aimed so partisanly at women audiences. For them it wasn't a question of being appalled by humour which dared to use male behaviour as its butt: in classical patriarchal style, they simply failed to recognise that any joke had been made. Surprisingly, the most notable exception to this is offered by the review in the ultra-conservative *Daily Telegraph* by Patrick Gibbs. After repeating an earlier festival review where he described *A Question of Silence* as 'the fiercest feminist film I have ever seen', Gibbs goes on to comment that 'My original suggestion that some touches of Bunuel fantasy might have helped now seems inept, for it would have enabled us to laugh it off as black comedy, whereas it is so realistically chilling that few males, I imagine, will leave it without examining painfully their consciences and their conduct'.<sup>8</sup>

As distributors we were never impressed by the common illusion that newspaper critics are

impartial arbiters of taste. We knew from bitter experience that critics are best understood as a part of an industry. The space and time they give to particular films usually reflects the agenda of mainstream film culture – some films and issues are seen as inherently important, while others fall so far outside these parameters that they can hardly be dealt with at all. There was simply no conceptual room for these critics to examine the questions outlined above or to look at the contribution *A Question of Silence* makes to the development of a new and more popular kind of political film-making. That job was left to *Time Out*<sup>9</sup>, *City Limits*<sup>10</sup>, *Marxism Today*<sup>11</sup>, *Spare Rib*<sup>12</sup>, and most recently *Feminist Review*<sup>13</sup>, who all published detailed examinations of the film, and, in some cases, its reception. Unfortunately for us, only the first two of these have a large enough place within the commercial market to be useful in combating the brickbats from the newspapers.

We felt, again probably far too optimistically, that the feminist audience referred to above would be sympathetic to these issues and would need little encouragement to attend. In fact, as *Spare Rib* readership surveys prove, feminists are not, in the main, in the habit of going to cinemas or even of thinking of it as a potential place to spend their time. This contrasts strongly with feminist theatre, music and literature, which have, over the years, built up large and committed audiences and readerships. In addition to this, some feminists and aficionados of independent film share a particular antipathy for 'proper' cinemas like the Screen on the Green and what might be seen as exploitative attempts to cash in on 'fashionable feminism'.

This protective attitude to 'independence' can be perceived between the lines of the *City Limits* review. Feminist poet and novelist Michele Roberts, who had presumably been employed because of her understanding of feminist literature rather than cinema, ends a generally lukewarm review by saying that the film is 'glossy and accessible'.<sup>14</sup> In the context of *City Limits*' review-speak these words suggest an experience which *other people*, less politically correct than the readers of the magazine, might enjoy, but might be found trivial and 'obvious' by those already enlightened. Yet again, the questions of female pleasure, female audiences and widely available political film-making are

<sup>6</sup> The *Guardian*, February 17, 1983, p 13.

<sup>7</sup> The *Financial Times*, February 18, 1983, p 17.

<sup>8</sup> The *Daily Telegraph*, February 18, 1983, p 13.

<sup>9</sup> Sarah Lefanu, 'A Matter of Murder', *Time Out*, February 18-24, 1983.

<sup>10</sup> Helen Mackintosh, 'Asking Why', *City Limits*, February 18-24, 1983, pp 13-14.

<sup>11</sup> Sarah Lefanu, 'A Question of Silence', *Marxism Today*, February 1983, p 37.

<sup>12</sup> Mandy Merck, 'Contempt of Court', *Spare Rib* 128, March 1983, p 26.

<sup>13</sup> Sarah Montgomery, 'Women's Women's Films', *Feminist Review* 18, Winter 1984, pp 39-41.

<sup>14</sup> Michele Roberts, *City Limits*, February 18-24, 1983, p 20.

64 pushed underground, as was suggested by a letter in the magazine the following week complaining that the review 'does little to encourage viewers to flock to what is surely a major event for women's film'.

### Strategies in Response to the Critics

In order to prevent the Screen on the Green and the Paris Pullman from prematurely replacing the film, Cinema of Women launched a 'rescue mission' aimed at transforming the generally favourable 'word-of-mouth' publicity we knew was circulating into audiences. Feminist businesses, women's newsletters and personal contacts were mobilised to help the film. Over 25,000 leaflets bearing the new slogan 'The critics were shocked but the audiences are cheering' were personally handed out by the collective and various press-ganged friends, mainly to women attending cinemas, theatres, political meetings, demonstrations and music events. Originally, leaflet distribution was used because it was a cheap alternative to press advertising, but I believe that the visible presence of Cinema of Women was also helpful in linking us (and the film) into the feminist community, thereby dispelling lingering doubts about The Screen on the Green. Overall, it is impossible to underestimate the importance of the response of the women's community in making the film a success.

At the same time we tried to use Shulman and French's reviews to our own advantage, press releasing them to journalists accompanied by a reply in the hope that the film might be covered in the news sections of papers and magazines. Partly, we were trying to convince feminists that the film was under attack and needed their support, but we also hoped that the publicity hook of 'the film that shocked critics' might bring in a few viewers. In effect, we were making a last ditch attempt to occupy one of the few 'mainstream' critical spaces still available to the film: the category marked 'controversy'. By this point in the saga of the film's distribution we could not afford to ignore any possibilities for publicising the film, but we were aware of the uncomfortably marginalised space we were being

forced into. Indeed, a few years later we and other feminists complained when almost all the feminist films in the London Film Festival appeared under a controversy heading, rather than in the main body of the festival. Although the tag can be useful in problematising real issues surrounding a film, all too often the phrase is used by distributors either too lazy or unimaginative to publicise hybrids, oddities or failures. Just as calling *Heaven's Gate* 'the most talked about film of the year' did little to lure people to an expansive and political western, we knew an obsessional concentration on Shulman et al's arguments about violence would not underline the pleasures for women we saw in the film.

### Later Thoughts and a Bitter Postscript

Despite all the early problems *A Question of Silence* became a considerable success, transferring, within London, to the Gate Cinema in Bloomsbury, the Ritzy in Brixton and the Everyman in Hampstead. Even now, three years later, it is still drawing large crowds on the repertory circuit in and outside London. It has also achieved a central place within writing on feminist cinema. Cinema of Women was able to use the image it had given us and the lessons about distribution we had learned to promote subsequent features, including *Born in Flames*, *Leila and the Wolves* and *Committed*. We did not, however, get the chance to deal with the cinema release of the next and far more difficult film directed by Marleen Gorris, *Broken Mirrors*. Following our record with *A Question of Silence*, the huge multi-national Thorn-EMI bought the rights for a sum we could not contemplate matching. Cinema of Women got the 16mm distribution of the film and gained the dubious pleasure of watching *Broken Mirrors* disappear from London cinemas with indecent haste, having failed to gain either general audiences or feminist support.

*A Question of Silence* and *Broken Mirrors* can be hired from Cinema of Women, 27 Clerkenwell Close, London EC1 (01-251-4978).



# MAKING TELEVISION HISTORY

ALD JONES CONSIDERS THE  
CONTEXTS OF  
'THE DRAGON HAS TWO TONGUES'

*... history programmes ... are shaped primarily within the categories of television rather than the needs of historical knowledge.* – Colin McArthur<sup>1</sup>

The antagonism between the requirements of 'good' television and the conventions of a printed text-based historiography, which McArthur here identifies, has been resolved by different makers of history programmes in very different ways. Yet, as the debate on the *Days of Hope* series suggests, many historians remain suspicious of representations of the past on television. Some critics have emphasised the empiricism implicit in current television practice, and question the capacity of even the 'progressive realist text' to subvert bourgeois aesthetics.<sup>2</sup> And since popular television demonstrably does not take kindly to a more rigorous, critical and oppositional historical discourse, it may be thought advisable for academic historians to keep a respectable distance from the camera crews of the television companies. 'Good' history and 'good' television, it appears, simply do not mix. But although it has much to recommend it, there are strong grounds for resisting this pessimistic, even self-indulgent, view, particularly if one shares Enzensberger's belief that the Left in general 'should argue theoretically and act practically from the standpoint of the most advanced

productive forces in their society, that they should develop in depth all the liberating factors immanent in these forces and use them strategically'<sup>3</sup>.

It follows from this argument that, in order to mount an effective challenge to the dominant ideological assumptions of our society, including the historical ones, battle must be commenced on all fronts, not excepting television. But if historians must embrace this most advanced form of mass communication, and are to write their histories with new materials in a collective and more restrained working environment for a more differentiated audience, what will this history actually look like? Most importantly, need historians always be constrained by the apparently immutable imperatives of television? McArthur, significantly, thinks not. In concluding his argument, he has indicated that

<sup>1</sup> Colin McArthur, *Television and History*, London, British Film Institute Television Monograph 8, 1980.

<sup>2</sup> Notably Colin MacCabe, 'Realism and the Cinema: Notes on Some Brechtian Theses', *Screen*, Summer 1974, vol 15 no 2, pp 7-27, and 'Memory, Phantasy, Identity: *Days of Hope* and the Politics of the Past', *Edinburgh '77 Magazine* (1977).

<sup>3</sup> Hans Magnus Enzensberger, 'Constituents of a Theory of the Media', in *Raids and Reconstructions. Essays on Politics, Crime and Culture*, London, Pluto, 1973, p 41.

television may not be inherently incapable of coping with the demands of more problematic approaches to the writing of history. Television, he suggests, can meet the needs of historical knowledge only if both television and historical practices are themselves transformed. Evidently, this view poses as much of a challenge to the historian as it does to the programme maker. It was precisely this challenge which *The Dragon Has Two Tongues* recently tried to meet.

The experimental series on the history of Wales, made by Harlech Television (HTV) for Channel Four, justifies to some extent McArthur's tempered optimism. As well it might, since its director, Colin Thomas, readily acknowledges his indebtedness to McArthur's monograph, itself the product of theoretical exchanges on popular television conducted in this and other journals.<sup>4</sup> Thomas, formerly of the independent Teliesyn company, was acutely aware of the difficulties of televising history, and set out with his collaborators to screen the series in as innovative and stimulating a way as possible. The result has been a qualified but important success, a benchmark in television history.

*The Dragon Has Two Tongues* consisted of thirteen half-hour programmes transmitted January-March 1985 and covered in chronological sequence two thousand years of Welsh history from the Celts to the present. Where appropriate archive film was not available, Thomas heightened the dramatic power of the narration by employing a variety of visual techniques, including brief, silent costume reconstructions (Romans marching), split screen illustrations (miners at work), animation (Mabon smothering his critics with song) and some clever direction (during an account of Glyndŵr's insurrection, the viewer was shown a sequence of waterfalls, each stronger and louder than the last). Electronic music was also used to good effect. But audio-visual excitement notwithstanding, the actual subject matter of the series was remarkably conventional. Each episode focused on problems in the historical interpretation of specific periods, including the Roman occupation, The Dark Ages, Glyndŵr's Revolt, the gentry, industrialisation and the emergence of socialism. Little attention was paid to the centrality of the Welsh language, nor, beyond its use as 'illustration' was any serious

attempt made to evaluate its literature. Women figured hardly at all. For several reasons, the series cannot be said to have marked a truly radical departure in television history, nor in the writing of the history of Wales.

*The Dragon Has Two Tongues* should also be appraised in relation to other documentary history programmes. After all, it is only the most recent of numerous attempts to render history on popular television, including most notably Robert Kee's *Ireland: a Television History*, Tom Steel's *Scotland's Story* and Dai Smith's series of television essays, *Wales! Wales?*. Another recent approach has been that of Television History Workshop's oral history programmes from Greg Lanning's 1981 *Brixton Tapes* to *Making Cars* and *City General*, also screened on Channel Four. There are, of course, many others, and it would be instructive to pursue a more general and comparative line of enquiry, which would enable the *Dragon* to be located more firmly within a larger constellation of history programmes. For, while acknowledging John Caughie's unease regarding the category of 'genre' in television criticism<sup>5</sup>, a separate study of historical representations in television may nevertheless be useful. Such an analysis of the social uses of the past in the present would require the historiographical decoding not only of 'academic' television history, but also of westerns, romances, advertisements and so forth. It may now be time to consolidate and to reflect more fully on the 'state of the art' of tele-history.<sup>6</sup>

In the absence of a systematic stock-taking exercise of this kind, it is difficult to isolate and to evaluate with any degree of precision the

<sup>4</sup> Selections were reprinted in Tony Bennett, Susan Boyd-Bowman, Colin Mercer and Janet Woollacott (eds), *Popular Television and Film*, London, British Film Institute, 1981, pp 285-352.

<sup>5</sup> John Caughie, 'Television Criticism: "A Discourse in Search of an Object"', *Screen*, July-October 1984, vol 25 no 3-4, p 117.

<sup>6</sup> Some of the theoretical problems inherent in 'popular history' are dealt with by Keith Tribe in 'History and the Production of Memories', *Screen*, Winter 1977/8, vol 18 no 4, pp 9-22, and Michael Bommers and Patrick Wright, "'Charms of Residence": the Public and the Past', in R Johnson, G McLennan, Bill Schwarz and D Sutton (eds) *Making Histories: Studies in History Writing and Politics*, London, Hutchinson, 1982.

methodological innovations which a number of directors and script-writers have been able to make in recent years. However, it can be argued that two significant developments in the *Dragon* series deserve further comment and elucidation, namely the form of the narration, and the structured response and participation of (a minority of) the audience.

If, as McArthur has argued 'the central ideological function of the narration is to confer authority on, and to elide contradictions in, the discourse'<sup>7</sup>, Thomas and his collaborators, in seeking to create a different kind of history programme, were faced with a fundamental problem from the very beginning. They were eager to convey a sense of the complexity of the Welsh past, without conferring on the series the stamp of authority of any one historical assessment. 'Unbiased history', their information leaflet informs us, 'does not exist'. A narrator, on or off camera, would implicitly have undermined any such intention. Their solution, in theory at least, was interesting and remains potentially rewarding. In order to facilitate the communication of historical ideas and information, but to avoid the closure of the narrative which may have ensued, two presenters offered two very different perspectives on each episode.

For six and a half hours, viewers found Marxist historian Gwyn A Williams pitting the Permanent State of Emergency thesis of Welsh history against writer and broadcaster Wynford Vaughan-Thomas's Continuity of Traditions.<sup>8</sup> Both presenters appeared together briefly on camera at the end of each programme to exchange views and to sum up their conflicting arguments. The problematic nature of the relationship between the narratives and the images throughout the series was made explicit in the final episode when a newsreel sequence depicting recent events was repeated, one with a voice-over by Vaughan-Thomas, the other by Professor Williams. They 'read' the sequences, as one had come to expect, in radically different ways. It was not an unsuccessful attempt by the director to encourage 'an awareness that some facts are open to totally different interpretations'. But to avoid the charge that the series advocated a form of historical relativism, in which one historical argument is just as good as any other, a range of secondary and primary sources was

made available. Both presenters wrote their own books<sup>9</sup>, and four substantial but inexpensive resource packs containing documents with bilingual commentaries were compiled by the Gwynedd Archives Service. These were intended to 'enable the viewer to take an informed critical position which may be distinct from that of both presenters'. Commenting on this total package of resources, HTV's Director of Programmes, Huw Davies, has claimed that 'the programme itself has made history'.

The dialectical format, however progressive its motives, has not been free from criticism. Firstly, it has been suggested that the half-hour units were too congested, and that the internal arguments confused rather than enlightened the audience. Related to this was the suspicion in the minds of many viewers that the arguments themselves were often only artificially polemical, and that the presenters were obliged by the logic of the programme to adopt combative but on occasions untenable and unconvincing historical views. It may be that, in this respect at least, television's tendency to simplify arguments and its preference for sharp juxtaposition did take precedence over 'the needs of historical knowledge'.

A second criticism has broader implications. Far from subverting the conventions of television history, the *Dragon* may be said merely to have mirrored the old social/gender relations in a novel way. However tendentious their approach, the presenters confirmed and reinforced a patriarchal view of the past, and one wonders how differently the subject matter would have looked from a feminist perspective.<sup>10</sup>

As these criticisms themselves testify, a concerted effort was made to involve the audience in as immediate a way as possible in discussions initiated by the programmes. Thanks to the skilful and energetic co-ordination of

<sup>7</sup> Colin McArthur, *op cit*, p 22.

<sup>8</sup> Summaries were published in *See 4*, no 8, January 1985, pp 6-7.

<sup>9</sup> Gwyn A Williams, *When Was Wales? A History of the Welsh*, London, Penguin, 1985, and Wynford Vaughan-Thomas, *Wales: A History*, London, Michael Joseph, 1985.

<sup>10</sup> A feminist critique was incorporated into the programme literature, and one of the four resource packs, *Hanes Merched Cymru/Welsh Women's History*, was written and compiled in direct response to the series.

68 HTV's Community Education Officer Bethan Eames, 130 Viewers' Groups were formed in order to 'turn passive viewers into active participants'.<sup>11</sup> Many were established in schools or around existing local history, adult education, Extra-Mural or Women's Institute/Merched y Wawr groups. A number of other institutions, including local video workshops, the National Campaign for the Care and Rehabilitation of Offenders (NACRO) and the Welsh Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom (WCPBF) were also involved in setting up local groups. Significantly, many continued to meet after the ending of the series. Some have become classes for learning Welsh, and others have reconstituted themselves as local history groups or branches of *Llafur*, the Society for the Study of Welsh Labour History.

Thus, in addition to a television series, two books, four resource packs and information leaflets, there has been an extensive and organised social dimension to the *Dragon Has Two Tongues*. The exercise had some interesting consequences. Some participants remarked that their involvement with the regular Viewers' Groups had led them to 'watch television in a new way'. The pause and rewind buttons, by freeing viewers from the remorseless flow of sequential images over which previously they had no control, have made the serious study of television possible for anyone with access to a video recorder. As a result, discussions about the content, structure and style of the *Dragon* programmes in some instances triggered a collective criticism of the content, structure and style of television itself. Related issues, including the making of television imagery, editing methods and linkage, were raised during a post-series Conference organised by Channel Four to which members of Viewers' Groups and others were invited.<sup>12</sup> One hundred and seventy or so attended a seminar on television history chaired by Channel Four's Chief Executive Jeremy Isaacs, and a similar number packed a plenary session to interrogate the two presenters, director Colin Thomas and series researcher Medwen Roberts. Filmed extracts of these often highly-charged sessions are to appear on S4C and Channel Four.

The Viewers' Groups, however, did not act as tele-historical watchdogs in a cultural and political vacuum. It is important to bear in mind, for example, that the series coincided almost

precisely with the final three months of the coal miners' strike. For many in the Groups the strike was an overriding preoccupation, and it was thought natural that an interest in Wales's past should dovetail with a concern for its future. In Maerdy a viewing group grew out of the activities of the Women's Group, formed in support of the miners' strike, and elsewhere in Glamorgan viewers met to discuss jointly the *Dragon* and Granada's *Television* series. Thus skills learnt in analysing the *Dragon* could be applied to media coverage of the dispute generally – and beyond.

The missed opportunity of devolution in 1979, the growth of Conservatism and the long-term structural erosion of the economic base on the one hand, and the popular mobilisation to secure S4C, feminism and the peace movement on the other, were all crucially important components of the culture within which the Viewers' Groups operated, and in which the series itself was made.<sup>13</sup> The miners' strike threw each of these into sharper relief, and on numerous occasions echoes of the troubled present could distinctly be heard in the constructions of the past offered by the *Dragon*.<sup>14</sup> The final scene of the last programme, without doubt the most poignant of all, showed the miners of Maerdy, led by the women of the Rhondda, defiantly returning to work at the end of the strike, beaten but united, under banners which proclaimed their unshaken socialism. What had long been regarded as proletarian myth had apparently kicked its way back into reality. But how are we to interpret this powerful but ambiguous sequence? Maerdy,

<sup>11</sup> Gwyn A Williams in *See 4*, op cit, p 6. It is estimated that each episode, broadcast on both S4C and Channel Four, attracted an audience of about one million viewers.

<sup>12</sup> 'The Dragon Has Two Tongues, Television and History', held in the Cyncoed Conference Centre, Cardiff, April 12-14, 1985.

<sup>13</sup> The political culture of modern Wales has been re-examined in John Osmond (ed), *The National Question Again. Welsh Political Identity in the 1980's*, Gomer, 1985. The origins and subsequent development of S4C are considered in David Bevan, 'The Mobilization of Cultural Minorities: the Case of Sianel Pedwar Cymru', *Media, Culture and Society*, 6, 1984, pp 103-117, and by Owen Edwards in *The Listener*, July 26, 1984, p 29.

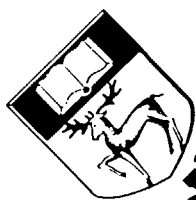
<sup>14</sup> For the impact of the miners' strike see Kim Howells, 'Stopping Out: the Birth of a New Kind of Politics', in Huw Beynon (ed), *Digging Deeper: Issues in the Miners' Strike*, London, Verso, 1985, pp 139-148.

the last working pit in the Rhondda, will soon be closed. Does it signify the Death of Wales? Or is it a tribute to a continuing tradition of Welsh socialist resistance, of which Maerdy is but the most potent and internationally recognised manifestation? The voice-overs reinforced the duality of the image. Vaughan-Thomas put it blandly but encouragingly that, despite entering a 'nightmare period', Wales and the Welsh will survive intact. Williams, the 'Calvinist Marxist', countered with the view that Wales is an act of will: it is in being only where and when it is made to be. 'The Welsh will live', Williams concluded, 'only if they act.'

To end on a note of self-criticism, the article, perhaps mistakenly, has avoided an exploration of the systems of signification which produced

meaning in the series. Much work remains to be done here. In particular, the building-blocks with which the concept of 'Welshness' was constructed, the connotations of pithead, choir place of worship, landscape or traces of the 'other' language which make up what Barthes has termed the rhetoric of the image<sup>15</sup>, require closer examination. Emphasis has been placed instead broadly on three contexts of the series, which may be referred to as the historiographical, the representational and the cultural. The series marks an attempt by historians to engage with a technology which they do not normally find congenial or responsive to their needs, and, equally importantly, it provided a means whereby the conventions of television could themselves be scrutinised. Channel Four deserves to be congratulated for commissioning a series which attracted such engaged audiences and so much constructive criticism.

<sup>15</sup> Roland Barthes, 'Rhetoric of the Image', in Stephen Heath (ed) *Image-Music-Text*, Fontana, London, 1977, especially pp 46-51.



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# NEW APPROACHES TO FILM HISTORY

BY GINETTE VINCEDEAU

Within French cultural practices, the choice of Cerisy-la-Salle as a venue for this conference<sup>1</sup> was not without significance. For, if the seventeenth century chateau (situated in Normandy) has, since 1945, housed some of the most prestigious cultural events in France in literature, philosophy, sociology, politics and the arts (conferences on Barthes, Artaud, Bachelard, Duchamp, etc) it has, until recently, remained almost entirely closed to the cinema.<sup>2</sup> This placing of film studies on the 'high' cultural map is also more or less coincidental with the recent inclusion of the subject on a wider institutional network in the French education system, namely on the official secondary school curriculum and as a discipline for a full university degree.

This conference was coordinated by Jacques Aumont and Michel Marie, of Paris III University, and André Gaudreault of the Université Laval, Quebec. All three are involved in the new bilingual (French-English) journal *IRIS* which sees, in its first editorial<sup>3</sup>, the dominant characteristics of film theory today as increased institutionalisation and internationalism. This dual tendency also informs film history, which now approaches its 'object' in all the complexity of its determinants (as opposed to the old dichotomy work of art/ industrial product). Along with examining the 'state of things' in film history today, the conference could be seen to have two inter-related aims. First, a *rapprochement* between historians and theoreticians, on the lines of a recent thematic issue of *IRIS*<sup>4</sup>, and, second, the widening of the debate to non-academics such as representatives from film archives and publishers. If the presence of the latter provided

the welcome inclusion of material considerations essential to the study of film history (film availability, restoration work on prints, outlets for research), the articulation of theory and history mostly remained at the potential stage, and André Gaudreault's belief that 'all historians of the cinema must also be theoreticians' did not meet with such a wide acceptance or, at least, discussion as might have been hoped for.

All conferences suffer from material contingencies, but it is worth pointing out that the French-speaking requirement at Cerisy, combined with financial considerations, meant the absence of representatives of some of the most stimulating new tendencies in film history, notably from the United States. Nevertheless, the week-long conference, closed by the doyen of French film history, Jean Mitry, afforded a most fruitful overview of the current state of interests and preoccupations in the field which, although they sometimes tended towards the idiosyncratically French (in what was repressed as much as in what was expressed), were by no means limited to that country and are on the whole symptomatic of developments on the wider international scene.

Three large intermingling areas of concern dominated the conference both in terms of the papers given and of the response elicited in the

<sup>1</sup> New Approaches to Film History, Cerisy-la-Salle, France, August 18-25, 1985.

<sup>2</sup> The two (recent) exceptions are: a conference on 'modernist' cinema (*cinémas de la modernité*) and one on Méliès and the beginnings of the cinema.

<sup>3</sup> *IRIS*, vol 1 no 1, 1983, pp.2-3.

<sup>4</sup> *IRIS*, vol 2 no 2, 1984.

other participants. Briefly, they were: A reflection on the ethics, practices and modalities of film history, its relationship to 'History', and its manifestations in terms of the historiography of French cinema.

Research into early cinema to which, thanks to the presence of Madeleine Malthête-Méliès and Jacques Malthête (Méliès descendants and heads of the *Association des Amis de Georges Méliès*), the projection of newly discovered and restored Méliès films brought a very pleasant 'illustration'.

The coming of sound and the 1930s, also vividly complemented by some very rare French 1930s films from Paris III's Cinémathèque Universitaire.

When Roland Cosandey asserted, after Vincent Pinel's exposé on the restoration of film prints at the Cinémathèque Française, that for him the conference had only just begun (although it was on its penultimate day), under the playful polemic lay a concern which permeated the whole event, namely the elusive nature of the very object of film history, both in its material and theoretical dimensions. The hair-raising nature of the problems attendant to the physical preservation of films parallels the difficulties inherent in writing their history, problems well defined in Michèle Lagny's intervention, 'history as cinema's auxiliary?'. Lagny, who, in common with many participants is by training a 'straight' historian, mapped out many of the crucial issues pertaining to the 'object' cinema: is it still in need of legitimisation? Can we speak of cinema in the singular? Is cinema already a dead object? Guarding against the double pitfall of teleology and normativity, Lagny also pointed out the dangers inherent in the (often fetishistic) search for origins—a vital issue for early cinema—and controversially argued that a positivist history of the cinema is not sufficient; the historian must 'invent' its objects and sources—in a phrase, practice history before archeology.

Alongside this questioning of the function of the film historian today, some interventions dealt with how film history has been written in the past: Roland Cosandey focused on texts from the 1920s and 1930s, whereas Jean-Pierre Jeancolas gave a specifically French overview of works since 1935 (Bardèche and Brasillach, Sadoul, etc). From the two papers emerged one

common thread: the close link, in all these texts, between subjective memory and history. As Cosandey pointed out, for the writers of the late '20s/early '30s, the infancy of cinema corresponded to their own—a point astonishingly illustrated by Jean Mitry, who declared that his cinematic memory dated back to 1909. Mapping out the areas of most blatant weakness in terms of French cinema, namely an economic and institutional history on the one hand, and a history of audiences on the other, Jeancolas charted the evolution, in the historiography of French cinema, from what he called the 'totalising' approach (Sadoul, Mitry, etc), based on mostly unverifiable data, through the *auteurist* monographs of the 1960s, to the recent (post-1975)<sup>5</sup> emphasis on archives and factual accountability, themselves, as Lagny and others agreed, not devoid of their own pitfalls.

Such risks particularly haunt work on early cinema, for it is the area which has possibly been the most 'mis-treated' by previous histories, and, concurrently, the one for which the problem of documents, or 'traces', poses itself most acutely. In this respect, Aldo Bernardini gave an informative paper charting the state of research into early cinema in Italy where, since the early '70s, for cultural and ideological reasons, funds have become available for a variety of interventions (publications, conferences, festivals, etc). The major trends in the work undertaken, apart from the constitution of extensive filmographies, could be defined as a recognition of the intertextual nature of cinema, leading to research into alternative types of material, such as posters, directories, etc. Bernardini concluded with an appeal to international solidarity and the need to end competition and secrecy in research—a feeling which found an echo in the round table on film archives, where the closed nature of continental film collections (on the Langlois model) was unanimously denounced as a major block on the progress of film history. There are, however, clear indications of imminent changes in this respect.

But, although filmographies and archive work form a considerable part of research into early

<sup>5</sup> 1975 marked the publication of Raymond Chirat's trend-setting catalogue of French films of the 1930s, followed by several others.

cinema, theoretical considerations are not absent from it. André Gaudreault proposed to 'interrogate the place of theory in the field of film history in the light, principally, of the many and stimulating works of research conducted recently into what is called early cinema'. After a critique of the dominantly teleological approach of most previous historians (among them Mitry), Gaudreault proceeded to delineate his own methodology, inspired by the Russian formalists. Using the concept of 'modes of filmic practice' as defined by David Bordwell, Gaudreault finds, for the period 1895-1915, two dominant modes. These are, briefly, a 'system of spectacle attractions'<sup>6</sup> for the period 1895-1908, where the basic autonomous unit is the shot, and a 'system of narrative integration' for the period 1908-1915, where filmic discourse is put to the service of narrative, but where the marks of enunciation are still visible (a period which plays a transitory 'buffer' role between the 'spectacle', pre-Griffith, type of cinema, and what we now call 'classical' cinema). Within these two systems, the same figures (e.g. close-ups, editing) can play a different *function*. Finally, Gaudreault emphasised, as Lagny had done, that the historian of early cinema, as for any period, must account for the historicity of his (sic) own look at the past.

The rising importance of early cinema is also evident in the growing number of university theses and dissertations on the subject (listed, for French universities, by Jean Gili) and in the massive project undertaken by André Gaudreault, in collaboration with Tom Gunning and a number of students from Quebec, in the wake of the Brighton Fédération Internationale des Archives du Film (FIAF) conference of 1978, of a universal analytical filmography of early cinema. Starting with a systematic description (credits, genre, plot, technical *découpage*) conducted according to a rigorous and very detailed grid, of all films from 1900 to 1906 held by the National Film Archive in London (who have given them free access to their material), they are planning the publication of

their research in several volumes, the first one of which should come out, in French and English, three years from now. With contacts already established in Britain, France and Italy, they are intent on extending their international networks of helpers.<sup>7</sup>

Although the 1930s and the coming of sound are infinitely better documented than the beginnings of cinema, the need to seek alternative material and to use new approaches is also felt, if one is to get beyond the repetitious nature of most existing literature on the subject. The technological 'breakthrough' of sound also makes this decade a key period for the study of the interaction of economic and aesthetic factors. To this end, my own paper proposed the examination of multi-language films (a phenomenon which knew its heyday between 1930 and 1933 but went on throughout the decade, whereby a film was shot simultaneously, or remade into, several languages for the corresponding markets) as a way to refine our notion of national specificity in the cinema. Although the work is still in progress, present results indicate the paramount importance of intertextuality and, in the case of French cinema, of intertextual links with the 'spectacle' arts of the period (theatre, music hall).

In very different ways, intertextuality could also be seen as one of the guiding principles in Dudley Andrew and Rick Altman's papers. The latter focused on the notion of 'sound space'. Stating his disappointment in the available works on sound, Altman called for the necessity to explore different types of material, in his case the reports and journals of sound technicians, and showed how essential the practices of previous technologies (notably radio and public address systems) had been for the beginnings of sound in the cinema. Looking at variations in the techniques employed by sound engineers (in the placing of microphones in relation to actors for example), Altman argued that intelligibility rather than 'naturalness' became the top priority by the end of the decade (the reverse of what it had been at first), and that the 'focalised' and highly intelligible sound track both linked the subject-spectator to the diegesis by putting him (sic) at the focal point of two diverging spaces, but also in some sense 'justified' visual voyeurism by the immediacy of its aural address.

Whereas Altman had worked only on

<sup>6</sup> In French, '*système d'attractions monstratives*'.

<sup>7</sup> For further information, contact: Projet d'analyses filmographiques, Département des Littératures, Pavillon de Koninck, Université Laval, Ste-Foy, Quebec, Canada G1K 7P4.



Hollywood films, Andrew's concern was with French cinema in the 1930s. The first part of his paper related to the running debate on the historiography of French cinema, Andrew positioning himself half-way between Sadoul (the history of masterpieces) and Jeancolas (film as social testimony). Andrew's interest is with French films of the '30s as cultural discourses and their intertextual links with certain strands of 'high' French culture (writers: Colette, Gide, Aragon; painters such as Kokoschka, de Chirico, etc) which he sees, in the '30s, as coming closer to popular/populist culture. Rejecting the 'narcissism of teleology' on the one hand and 'professionalism' on the other, Andrew claimed for the historian the right to have a personal rapport with the films under study, thus justifying his focus, in the end, on a fairly small corpus of mainly 'classics' which, as was observed, Sadoul himself would not have disavowed.

Despite their prominence, historiography, early cinema, and the 1930s, were not, of course, the only areas investigated – but it is more difficult to do justice to wide-ranging and uneven round tables on the one hand, and, on the other, to thematically localised papers, such as Jean-Louis Leutrat's penetrating analysis of Godard's *Passion* (1983), Jacques Goimard's paper on science-fiction and François Baby's intervention on cinema and society in Quebec. However pertinent these analyses, they remained perhaps too specific in their models to permit much extrapolation. A case could be made, though, for the special relevance of Godard, who claimed at Venice in 1983 that he would probably die at the same time as cinema, to film history. Leutrat examined the relationship of *Passion* to the history of cinema (different from

the *cinéphile* films of the early 1960s), as well as the inscription of history within the film itself, and in particular the complex play of mirrors between painting, photography and cinema, the notion of 'theatre of memory', and the Derrida-inspired concept of traces.

To summarise a week-long conference is inevitably a reductive and simplifying process and a report such as this can never account for the multi-dimensional richness of the event. But, to conclude, I will first borrow Jacques Aumont's remark made on the last morning; he pointed out the almost tangible effect produced in the audience when one participant held out an actual document (a Pathé share) – an effect, one could almost say, of relief: here was a 'real' historical object. If Aumont was perhaps too severe in seeing this positivist (and fetishistic?) attitude as specifically French, he perceptively underlined it as symptomatic of the quasi-consensus of opinion in evidence at Cerisy (or at least absence of polemics) which, to his surprise, almost consistently relegated theory to the margins of the debate. As a rider, I would add that, from an Anglo-Saxon perspective, another marginalisation or even absence called for 'surprise', namely that of any problematisation of 'the historian' as well as the object of historical research, in terms of class, race and gender: the historian is, it would seem, still white, male and middle-class. For, if the notions of the object (history of what?), and purpose (history, what for?), of history were often debated, one crucial question remained to be asked: *whose* history? As Jean Mitry put it, ending the conference on a hopeful (and self-critical) note, 'new historians will need to be rigorous'.

# 3 OUT OF 4

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# THE MTM PHENOMENON

## THE COMPANY, THE BOOK, THE PROGRAMMES – AS EXAMINED BY SUSAN BOYD-BOWMAN

A recent BFI book about an independent American television production company, a company named for a TV star who began as Miss Hotpoint in 1955, is a creditable addition to the literature of TV studies and should also spur the return to the realm of critical respectability of that long unfashionable concept: quality. For the sub-title of *MTM*, 'Quality Television', edited by Jane Feuer, Paul Kerr and Tise Vahimagi<sup>1</sup>, represents a cautious polemic in favour of evaluation in popular television, by providing an industrial and conjunctural analysis of progressive output in a capitalist broadcasting system.

The original *Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-77) was partly inspired, according to the star herself, by Vice-President Spiro Agnew's notorious attack on the TV networks for their news coverage of the Nixon Administration. For this fact and many others about the production history of the series produced by the MTM company, we can thank the writers of *MTM*. According to co-editor Paul Kerr, the original *MTM Show* could be seen as part of CBS's defence of liberal values (under a new network president favourably disposed to shows more sophisticated than rural comedies like *The Beverly Hillbillies*) against the hostility of a conservative administration which was threatening to prosecute anti-trust suits against the three major networks. In the climate of Republican anti-monopolistic rhetoric, an independent production company (originally set up because of a deal between CBS and a comedienne who had made a hit on its earlier *The Dick Van Dyke Show*) managed to profit from the availability of non-network capital and to secure conditions of creative freedom within the broadcasting industry. The MTM Company, runs the story in this book, developed a distinct 'quality' style, discernible as a corporate signature on a plethora of series spanning fifteen

years and a number of genres, which were aimed at a more affluent sector of the viewing audience than had been the target of previous commercial programming.

Having started with a number of successful sitcom spin-offs for CBS, the company in 1977 switched to making hour-long dramatic series, notable for their large multi-ethnic casts and for scripts with more than one storyline, and which juxtaposed comedy and melodrama: first *Lou Grant* for CBS, and then *Hill Street Blues*, *Remington Steele*, and *St. Elsewhere* for NBC. So: MTM can be seen as an author, argues co-editor Jane Feuer, in much the same way as the Freed Unit within MGM has been discussed as corporate author of the musicals of the 1940s and '50s, as a protected arena of creative collaboration within one sector of an industrial oligopoly.

*MTM's image as the quality producer serves to differentiate its programmes from the anonymous flow of television's discourse and to classify its texts as a unified body of work, two of the functions Foucault says the author's name serves.* (p 33)

In Britain, this kind of authorship approach has been extended to some British film studios, and even recently to a television subsidiary (*Made for Television: Euston Films*<sup>2</sup>), but not to US television. Significantly, many of the characteristics ascribed to MTM series, such as literate scripts and ensemble acting, are aspects of the critical orthodoxy about upmarket British cinema and TV series.

<sup>1</sup>Jane Feuer, Paul Kerr and Tise Vahimagi (eds), *MTM: 'Quality Television'*, London, British Film Institute, 1984. Page references will be given in the text.

<sup>2</sup>Manuel Alvarado and John Stewart (eds), *Made for Television: Euston Films Limited*, London, British Film Institute/Methuen, 1985.

The publication of this book, alongside an MTM season at the National Film Theatre and an evening of MTM shows on Channel Four in December 1984, could be seen as boosterism for the acceptable face of American TV imports, acceptable because it corresponds to certain British cultural values, while retaining the 'energy' associated with popular American TV in general. Like the writers for *Movie* in the early '60s, the Wider Television Access-led group is championing 'good' Hollywood product against the insipid homegrown variety, and challenging the snobbery of TV critics, on the one hand, and film theorists who write off all popular TV, on the other.

This work on MTM is an important addition to television studies. The book avoids most of the pitfalls attributed to *auteur* criticism. Although most of the contributors lean heavily on interviews with 'creative personnel', they would be hard-pressed to find a consistent 'vision' in a company which is a changing cluster of people who have spent most of their careers in mainstream television. They also avoid the empiricism of most production studies, and Feuer and Kerr, especially, provide thorough conjunctural analyses, emphasising the impact of Federal Communication Commission rulings on network policies at the moments when various MTM series were being originated. At the end of the book there is a comprehensive guide to MTM productions, the sort of catalogue that *Primetime* specialises in.

Unfortunately this study won't be as influential as it could have been. Much of the writing in this uneven collection is marred by a slide from well-researched production history to reviews of certain series scarcely distinguishable from good journalism. The editors of the book acknowledge their partisanship; their impetus is the

*desire to chronicle and in some cases even to celebrate programmes which some British and American critics... firmly believe to be among the best and most interesting presently to be seen on either side of the Atlantic.* (p ix)

The problem is that both the chroniclers and the celebrators (who give little impression of co-operation during the preparation of the book, such are the gaps and repetitions) leave their critical terms largely unexamined. Characteristic

of both the book and the Channel Four documentary *Cat Among Lions* (named after the MTM signature, a kitten miaowing where the MGM lion used to roar), is a tendency to slide back into a literary criticism laden with ungrounded terms. Both combine an evaluation of the company with impressionistic accounts of the shows, searching for correspondences between production process and texts. The myth is the Ealing one: the small family firm under a dynamic head (here Grant Tinker, Mary's husband, fills the Balcon role) who welds a variety of creative talents into an artistic unit able to beat the big boys by tapping the national unconscious in ways the majors never could. The texts articulate this populist struggle.

*Our very focus on MTM was in part predicated upon an enthusiasm for its products and a championing of its creative 'difference,' their 'progressiveness,' their 'reflexiveness.' But while recognising that 'difference' we would want to resist a view of MTM as the exception that proves the rule of American television. Clearly the company does serve something close to such a function inside the U.S. television industry; equally clearly its apparent ability to make 'quality' pay makes MTM both typical and untypical: at once artistic and industrial, a veritable 'quality factory.'* (p x)

The susceptibility of academics to the charms of the product – particularly Americans when it comes to MTM – annoys the more puritanical denizens of British Film Theory, and that annoyance was voiced at last year's International Television Studies Conference. But, as Sean Cubitt has noted, 'the attempt to establish a special genre of "quality television" is rooted in a difficult attempt to reconcile a literary-style analysis of programmes with an understanding of questions of audience demographics,'<sup>3</sup> neither of which are likely to appeal to a tradition of cultural studies still flailing against Leavis on the one hand and American sociology on the other. Granted that the project of this study is a difficult one, its uncritical use of evaluative terms (as in the paragraph quoted above) will not endear it to British readers of either a structuralist or a culturalist persuasion.

<sup>3</sup>Sean Cubitt, 'Television: Fix or Faction?', *Red Letters* 18, Autumn 1985.

In this review, I will attempt to assess the reception of MTM products in this country under some of those categories which appear in inverted commas throughout the book: 'Quality', 'Self-Reflexiveness' and 'Liberalism'. Because it gets most 'ink', *Hill Street Blues* will be the focus of my argument.

## QUALITY

The concept of quality has been shunned in structuralist and post-structuralist writing on culture in this country, largely as a result of the reaction against traditional criticism's emphasis on evaluation. So, for example, in film studies very little work has been done on European art cinema. In 1977 John Ellis subjected post-war film criticism to discourse analysis.<sup>4</sup> He came up with a composite description of a quality film (humanist, organic, realist, authentic), and then demonstrated how that rhetoric changed as critics of that period became disillusioned with the prospect of educating public taste, particularly in the face of producers' pandering to the American market. (The critics also perceived a loss of nerve by film-makers themselves in the years after the war.) British cinema slid into what they saw as a deserved eclipse (a native sub-genre like Hammer Horror was beyond the critical pale) and 'quality' was henceforward to be found in the occasional Hollywood film by a recognised director which would be screened at an art cinema like the Hampstead Everyman. In the '50s the strategy of British film culture became

*one of trying to encourage the development of an expanding circuit of specialised cinemas building on the film society movement, rather than trying to raise the standards of commercial cinema as a whole.*<sup>5</sup>

As well as this relocation of the 'quality' label across the Atlantic (and the Channel), Ellis noted a revision in the discourse of quality itself: it becomes less concerned with political values (the old transparent humanism) and more with aesthetic properties (a quality film should provide a shattering experience for the individual spectator):

*Instead of the assumption of clarity on the part of*

*the film, we now have a situation where a film is more interesting because it is puzzling, because it does not have the kind of clarity which makes it self-evident on first viewing.*<sup>6</sup>

Both these points are, I believe, relevant to the consumption of MTM series in this country: first, the recognition that 'quality' is to capitalist production as 'prestige' is to a system based on a public service ethos (and can survive as well in the international market); and secondly that minority audiences – those now partially catered for by Channel 4 – are willing to watch series which are 'difficult' by the standards of mainstream television. As Steve Jenkins points out in his excellent contribution on *Hill Street Blues*, even the panellists of *Did You See?* found the series virtually unfathomable (though that was before *Did You See?* won the British Academy of Film and Television Arts award for taking television seriously). Perhaps what we are observing is a modernist shift in television culture akin to the changes in film culture in the late '40s or early '60s, precipitated by a crisis in the domestic industry and a fresh wave of legislation.

Finally, one should recall that Ellis's project was to define the terms for a cinema of the '70s. The ambitions of the Independent Filmmakers Association to equate quality with *independent* cinema have been scarcely realised outside the domain of latenight Channel 4. There is a small irony here, since the IFA's report on the 'Future of the British Film Industry' (1977) was disparaging of television, which 'despite its benevolent and liberal facade, is in its own fashion just as closed and censorious as the commercial film industry'.<sup>7</sup> Almost nobody foresaw the way in which contradictions within the broadcasting industry would make television a key site for cultural struggle in the '80s (leading the IFA to become the Independent Film and Video Makers Association), let alone that despised American imports might have a progressive role in that struggle.

<sup>4</sup> John Ellis, 'Art, Culture and Quality – Terms for Cinema in the Forties and Seventies', *Screen* Autumn 1978, vol 19 no 3, pp 9-50.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*, p 45.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*, p 46.

<sup>7</sup> IFA Report, para 15, quoted in John Ellis, *op cit*.

MTM has been dubbed by its celebrators the 'Tiffany's of television'. What does quality mean in the discourse of contemporary television criticism? Many of the tropes discussed by Ellis with regard to quality cinema have been transferred to TV: for example, creative freedom still struggles against institutional dictates, whether at Euston Films or at MTM, where president Grant Tinker won a reputation for protecting the writer-producers from network interference. The humanist world view is much the same, though inflected by television's serial form in favour of series which interweave their characters' public and private lives.

In addition, the experience of watching quality TV is not one of being entertained, but of being obliged either to 'think' or to be 'shattered', preferably both. To quote the episode of Granada TV's series on *Television* which dealt with series and serials: 'Today *Hill Street Blues* is a continuing reminder that popular drama can still upset the rules of The Story Machine to tell stories that are more than just throwaway entertainment.'<sup>8</sup> *Hill Street Blues* is located in the tradition of series like *The Defenders* and *M.A.S.H.* in not sacrificing quality to the pursuit of mass audiences, because it knows how to tell 'good stories'. The clip from *The Defenders* used by Granada to illustrate this mythopoetic power is a self-reflexive one, in which the E G Marshall character explains that stories do not necessarily have neat endings. Quality series evade the equation between big ratings and formulaic programming. In *Cat Among Lions* actress Barbara Bosson (who plays Fay Furillo in *Hill Street Blues*) confirms our prejudices by stating that 'Most TV is soporific'. Her husband and former *Hill Street Blues* executive producer Steve Bochco explains that 'television is an advertising medium, not an art form, or even a form of entertainment.' But the MTM family aren't in the business of selling soap; their series require a new level of attention from the audience, and demonstrate that you can dramatise contemporary issues without alienating a broad audience.

Jane Feuer undertakes the tricky task of relating commodity production to textual production at MTM:

*There exist structural correspondences (homologies) between the two levels that may be encapsulated in*

*the terms 'quality TV' and 'quality demographics.' MTM is in the business of exchanging 'quality TV' for 'quality demographics.'* (p 34)

So the genre of quality TV has an economic determinant and an address to a culturally capitalised audience. Though *Hill Street Blues* is not a ratings hit, companies like American Express and Mercedes-Benz are happy to pay top dollar for slots on NBC, Thursdays at 10pm, because the series delivers a young, affluent, college-educated audience. Quality makes money, though at nearly one million dollars an episode, *Hill Street Blues* is the most expensive show on American TV<sup>9</sup>, and MTM can expect to recover costs only on syndication. (Here the myth departs from the British model, where realism and quality don't necessarily presuppose large production costs, and may indeed be seen as inimical to them.) The company claims to be in constant financial jeopardy.

In Britain, Channel Four's comparable profile as the upmarket network was tailor-made for the showcasing of a selection of MTM programmes (and the documentary *Cat Among Lions*) over nearly four hours of primetime on December 10, 1984. Although certain ITV companies and the BBC had used *Lou Grant*, *Remington Steele* and *Hill Street Blues* as late-night fillers, no MTM drama was networked in the UK until the fifth season of *Hill Street Blues* was picked up by Channel Four earlier this year.

Quality series are nevertheless vulnerable to market forces. As Paul Kerr points out in *MTM* (p.132), the autonomy of independent producers within network TV is double-edged. Although there have been various accounts of the cancellation of *Lou Grant*, the campaigning series set in a newspaper office, the timidity of those big sponsors, who were targeted for a product boycott by the right-wing opponents of the series, is reckoned a major factor in CBS's decision to axe the show. Another was that by 1981 the quality mantle had been usurped by the fledgling *Hill Street Blues*, making *Lou Grant* more vulnerable to political and market pressures. When push comes to shove, a quality

<sup>8</sup>'Television: The Story Machine', Granada TV, March 19, 1985.

<sup>9</sup>Steve Bochco, quoted in *The Evening Standard*, December 7, 1984.

image or a bank of Emmy awards is no guarantee of survival.

In my view, 'quality' doesn't figure as a category in the critical discourse about British television. Instead, we have 'prestige' series and serials (like *Jewel in the Crown* or *The Last Place on Earth*); well-crafted sleepers which eventually are hailed as major media 'events' (like *Boys from the Blackstuff*); as well as 'art' television, usually single plays with credentials of authorship, such as David Hare's *Dreams of Leaving*, analysed by John Caughie in his piece on 'Art Television'<sup>10</sup>. The hallmarks of the latter are an ideology of self-expression and social exclusiveness, neither of which pertain to quality television. *Hill Street*'s corporate authorship and the fact that its dominant narrative form is melodrama would both disqualify the series from either prestige or art labels. Quality may belong, still, only to the exceptional import marked as stylistically different, which demonstrates by contrast that the rest is dross. Ray Connolly commented in 1982 that *Hill Street* was 'so good it cannot possibly survive in the jungle of junk made for American TV'<sup>11</sup>. And if such an imported series does get noticed by the British audience, it is labelled a *cult*.<sup>12</sup>

## SELF-REFLEXIVITY

If quality demographics is the economic determinant of MTM's quality image, at the level of the text it's a quality *style*. The company's situation comedies were noted at the time for their use of character ensembles, for scripts centred on character motivation rather than jokes, and for their willingness to risk abrupt changes in tone (once again, qualities praised in British sit-coms like *Agony*). Though less topical than the rival '70s series produced by Norman Lear at Tandem, MTM sit-coms exhibited a self-reflexivity and intertextuality which distinguish them from run-of-the-mill series. Characters were spun off from Mary Richards's original circle into their own series, and then visited each other, forming an intertextual kinship system. This reflexivity reached a peak in *The Betty White Show*, in which the former Happy Homemaker from Mary Tyler Moore's WJM-TV reappears as an actress starring as a policewoman in a cop show-

within-the-show, *Undercover Woman*.

'In aligning itself with the modernist self-conscious mode, the MTM style makes yet another claim to quality status' (p 44), writes Feuer, though she goes on to say that these devices can have both constructive and deconstructive purposes. The fact that MTM series have tended to generate spin-offs, and that many of them call not only for extensive series knowledge but for awareness of the media as a whole, may not seem especially innovative, since TV feeds on itself all the time, and Feuer acknowledges that these allusions do not entail a critique of TV itself. But nevertheless the drama series' hybrid of realism and self-consciousness, and their interweaving of narrative strands from soap opera and other genres, have been hailed as a radical change in the paradigm of TV fiction – and also as pretentious decadence. As Steve Jenkins puts it in another chapter: 'The show's split identity becomes, for its champions, a sign of its progressive status within television drama ... while negative views of the same factor turn it into a sign of failure within their terms of definition' (p 186). Once again, the debate about the primacy of style over content recalls critical discourses about the New Waves of '60s cinema.

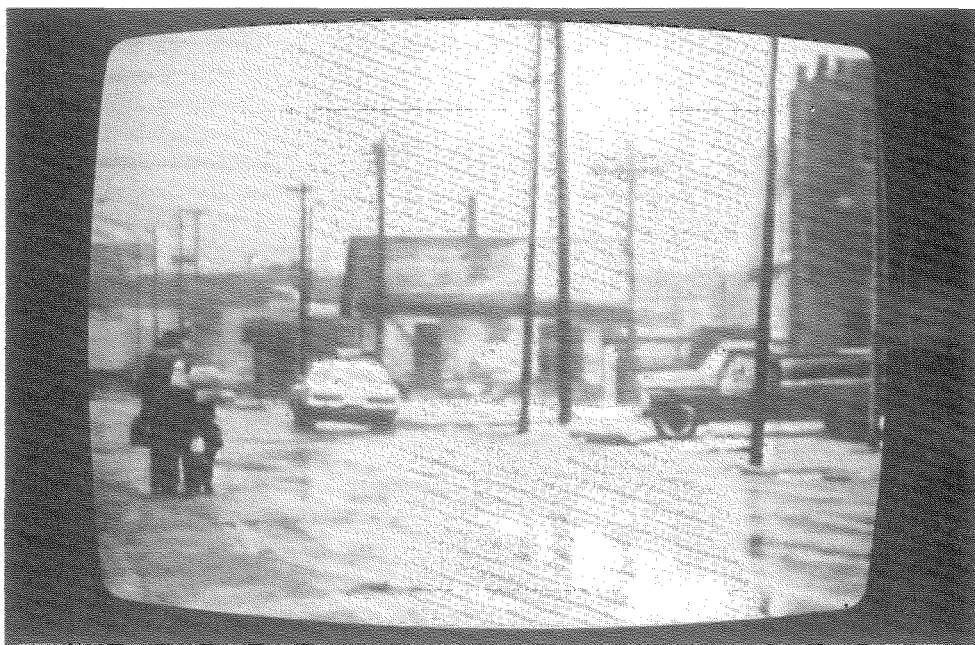
The intertextuality and self-reflexivity of MTM series are invariably the focus of any critical discussion. The Channel 4 documentary anachronistically used a clip from the original *Mary Tyler Moore Show* in which the newsroom at WJM-TV receives antagonistic mail from viewers in order to illustrate how the later *Lou Grant* series was targeted by the Moral Majority campaign, thereby reinforcing the homology between the MTM company and the moral stances of the journalists depicted in the fiction. Even critics who don't buy the MTM myth, like Bryan Appleyard in the *Times*<sup>13</sup> – 'the plots beneath the chaos [of *Hill Street*] are often the same old stories scrambled for effect' – will acknowledge a wholly new (to TV) visual and narrative style which, because it requires some

<sup>10</sup>Rhetoric, Pleasure and "Art Television" – *Dreams of Leaving*, *Screen*, vol 22 no 4, pp 9-31.

<sup>11</sup>Ray Connolly, *The Evening Standard*, May 26, 1982.

<sup>12</sup>cf Rachel Lever, 'Lonely Life of a Hill Street Fan', *Spare Rib*, November 1984, p 39.

<sup>13</sup>Brian Appleyard, *The Times*, December 1, 1984.



The MTM 'messy look': the realist *mise-en-scène* of *Hill Street Blues*.

effort on the part of the viewer, means that the series deserves a quality badge for form if not content.

The 'messy look' which so annoys the hostile reviewers in this country is nowhere in the MTM book very well analysed. Paul Kerr remarks on the 'Altmanesque' visual (and occasionally aural) style of the series, and at times quality seems to mean television which is as cinematic as possible on the small screen. *Cat Among Lions* (which Kerr wrote) begins with a montage of action sequences which show how much *Hill Street* borrowed from New Hollywood: slow motion, hand-held camera, syncopated shots, long travelling shots. We learn that the sinuous tracks down *St. Elsewhere*'s corridors are a by-product of the necessity of shooting almost everything in the studio, since L A exteriors can't be passed off as Boston. But the attempt to 'put more into a frame' of television, as Bochco puts it, demands a reconsideration of the codes of televisual, as opposed to cinematic, realism and spectatorship – something for which we're still waiting.

While the enthusiasts of *Hill Street Blues* (in this book and elsewhere) hail its visual style as a correlative of the dense, messy city life the series depicts, they give little attention to the

ingredients of that realist *mise-en-scène*. Among the many MTMers whose interviews (primary and secondary) form much of the raw material of the book and documentary, episode directors like Robert Butler, who gave the series its documentary appearance, don't seem to have made the running, as compared to producers and actors. So in *Cat Among Lions* it is actress Barbara Bosson who tells us that the network sent back the first episode of *Hill Street* because it was below broadcast standard. (A similar battle on studio lighting had been waged and lost over the *film noir* look intended for *Hazell*.<sup>14</sup>) Ultimately, auteurism in US television doesn't mean the director, as it does in cinema, or the writer, as in British TV fiction, but the 'hyphenates' who move up the ladder from scripting to producing.

The book's efforts at textual analysis don't really support the claims made for its progressive difference. Steve Jenkins finds three stylistic modes in every *Hill Street* episode, from the mock *ciné-vérité* of the roll-call pre-credit sequence, to the restrained soap-ish coda at the end (narrative excess often being buried in the

<sup>14</sup> Manuel Alvarado and Ed Buscombe, *Hazell: The Making of a Television Series*, London, British Film Institute, 1978.



bed of Furillo and Davenport), with what he characterises as little more than conventional TV grammar occupying the bulk of the episode, in which subplots are usually organised around pairs of police officers braced against the outside world. Even allowing for Jenkins' neglect of the occasional use of art cinema devices (like the austere back-and-forth pans in interrogation sequences), his scheme reduces *Hill Street*'s difference to its two main generic components: the crowded street realism of the police series, and the languid melodrama of the homelife codas. He argues that two audiences are being addressed: men who like action-adventure, and women who want emotional complications – and the latter are being short-changed by the paucity of female characters in the series: 'As a soap opera/cop show crossover (i.e. a series which plays on the personal/professional mix of its characters' lives), it exposes just how little *Hill Street* seems to offer its supposed female viewers' (p 192). (I don't find these gender divisions very convincing, and will return to the sexual politics of the series. Melodrama may be the overarching narrative mode of MTM serials, but they don't have much in common with *Dallas*.)

The book's writers also neglect narrative structure, beyond presuming *Hill Street*'s multiple plots to be progressive. We learn from Christopher Wicking's interview with Gene Reynolds (who pioneered parallel stories in *M.A.S.H.*) that the idea came from parallel editing in D W Griffith and that they call it the 'Double Curve'; a good one will achieve a harmonic between the stories being intercut. Elsewhere, structuralist academics like Caren Demming have picked over the five or more narrative strands in early episodes, and found them told in vague story time, most resisting closure, and with so many regular and minor characters that the viewer is obliged to identify with the narrative discourse itself rather than with particular characters.<sup>15</sup> Recently these narratives have been untangled, a result of NBC's insistence that at least one major story be tied up each week, and the series writers seem to be taking fewer chances on abrupt switches from sentiment to farce. No one in this study addresses these shifts in *Hill Street Blues*. Is watching the fifth series less of a 'shattering experience' than the first?

Both the academic critics who have hailed it as modernist and the more sceptical press have

fastened on to *Hill Street*'s breaking of the rules. But as Jenkins cautions, 'the importance of this image seems to go beyond the pleasures thus afforded, to the point where the text disappears; it becomes an abstraction of itself, distorted by the challengers and defenders of commercial television's "limitations"' (p 197). Consequently *Hill Street* has been seen both as 'a landmark show that announces the trend for a decade'<sup>16</sup> and a demonstration that 'you can do anything with style – indeed it is all you can do anything with.'<sup>17</sup>

## LIBERAL IDEOLOGY

It is difficult to assess the ideological effectivity of any television which aspires to modernism, as studies of the *Gangsters* series and avant-garde pop videos show.<sup>18</sup> Police series, unlike the hospital or newspaper sub-genres of TV fiction, have usually been read as politically conservative, imbricated with contemporary discourses on law and order. Is there such a thing as a 'liberal' police series? No, says Paul Kerr in another context, because:

*the police have an absolute monopoly on character itself in the genre; by regularly appearing week in and week out, television's police are always heroes, always already vindicated not only by the uniforms they wear or the badges they carry, but by their actions last week and in weeks to come.*<sup>19</sup>

But does even a series like *Hill Street Blues*, which uncommonly puts the police into a broader narrative frame, merely 'offer an aestheticised or even anaesthetised image of the operation of law and order in Reagan's America', as Kerr puts it on page 150 of this book? Yes,

<sup>15</sup>Caren Demming, 'Control Over Chaos: *Hill Street Blues* as a Narrative Text', paper for the International Television Studies Conference, London 1984.

<sup>16</sup>Michael J Pollan, 'Can *Hill Street Blues* Rescue NBC?', *Channels*, March/April 1983.

<sup>17</sup>Brian Appleyard, *op cit*.

<sup>18</sup>Paul Kerr, 'Gangsters: Conventions and Contraventions', in Tony Bennett et al (eds) *Popular Television and Film*, London, British Film Institute, 1981. E Ann Kaplan, 'A Postmodern Play of the Signifier? MTV: Advertising, Pastiche and Schizophrenia', paper for the International Television Studies Conference, London 1984.

<sup>19</sup>Paul Kerr, 'The Beat Goes On', *New Socialist* no 25, March 1985.



The MTM 'work-family': the *Hill Street* regulars at roll-call.

and it even displays the morality of a medieval witch trial, as Angela Carter argued in her review of the series.<sup>20</sup>

But Jane Feuer argues that 'Quality TV is liberal TV.' What she means here is that MTM series can be read on a number of levels, and on a 'superior' one by quality audiences who think of themselves as different from the mass of viewers, who are 'permitted to enjoy a form of television which is seen as more literate, more stylistically complex, and more psychologically "deep" than other TV fare' (p 56). But liberalism is more substantive than this definition of a sort of stratified polysemy implies.

Two of the principal tenets of '60s liberalism run through MTM output. The first is liberal sexual politics. While the MTM comedies eschewed the vogue for Relevance found in Lear productions, the impact of women's liberation (American-style) can be seen in the premise of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (the writers wanted to make Mary Richards a *divorcée*; she ended up as a career woman on the rebound from a four-year affair) and in its production history (in 1973 half the scripts were written by women). For

many female viewers, notes Feuer, Mary and Rhoda stood for an alternative life-style. Single career women have featured in almost every MTM series, finding quasi-familial relationships with their co-workers. Feuer sees the MTM work-families as both a response to the breakdown of the nuclear family, and as offering an idealised surrogate, so in fact they can be read as either progressive or backward-looking. According to her argument, liberal TV is equally hospitable to either view, but in describing the TV work-family as embodying Freud's ideal merger of love and work (p 58), her own belief in its progressiveness seems clear.

What about the sexual politics of later MTM series? Of the three women among the early *HSB* regulars, only Joyce Davenport, whose role as public defender put her in an adversarial position to Captain Frank Furillo (her lover and then husband), was represented both as feminine and professional. Fay Furillo, Frank's first wife, came off little better than the dizzy blondes of the movies, while Sergeant Lucy Bates was roughly equivalent to the wise-cracking spinsters played by Eve Arden in women's films of the '40s. Later series improved on this record, partly as a result of feminist criticism. Fay's character was changed so that she ceased being comic relief

<sup>20</sup>Angela Carter, *New Society*, September 23, 1982, p 510.

and came to work at the precinct station as a victims' aid officer; Lucy got (in lieu of a lover) a promotion, a foster child, and a female partner; new characters were introduced: Detective Patsy Mayo (who soon became the object of sexual harassment from Police Chief Daniels), and Officer Robin Tataglia, who at the time of writing is living with Sergeant Mick Belker, the eccentric loner. The latters' relationship occasionally replaces that of Davenport and Furillo in the coda which concludes each episode.

Meanwhile, Frank Furillo's patriarchal function is little diminished by his erstwhile alcoholism and his dependence on Joyce, but is occasionally made the subject of irony, as in the episode in which the various precinct captains go on a group therapy session and indulge in a collective Crisis-of-Masculinity.

The second hallmark of '60s liberalism is a welfarist ideology, a recognition that crime is a product of social deprivation not psychopathology, and a blurring of the distinction between 'us' (the legal professionals) and 'them' (the civilians on the street). Viewers with a long series memory will know that every one of the regulars, male and female, has a character failing, inclining to neurosis if not vice, which eventually imperils the safety or harmony of the group. *Hill Street Blues'* moral complexity distinguishes it from ordinary melodrama: discourses of tolerance, interdependence and egalitarianism are streaked through the writing. Commenting on the Encounter Group and marijuana-in-the-station-teapot episode, the *Listener* reviewer said the series isn't 'the American cops-n'-robbers show we know and love. It is a police series for liberals, dammit!'<sup>21</sup> Other British critics have argued that this moral complexity does not extend to representation of the 'enemy'. The supposedly realistic setting is an inner-city precinct 'where caring, sensitive professionals of all races and sexes carry on relentless warfare against a demonic lumpen proletariat', complained one correspondent in *New Socialist*:

*No wonder this programme has become the cult favourite of the Yuppie gentry in America: it faithfully reproduces both their own heroic self-image and their chic racism.*<sup>22</sup>

In fact, there are decent citizens 'out there', even

among the winos befriended by Belker and the Chicano street gangs on whom Lieutenant Goldblume keeps a paternal eye. Almost every episode has a minor sub-plot about a 'street crazy', an innocent made mad by city life, who is usually treated as absurd and often adopted by Belker. More problematic is the spatialisation of the series' setting, which locates the viewer's perspective with the force (albeit an ethnically varied one) within the station house – the regulars, the work-family – besieged by the perils 'out there'.

The series' treatment of race was one of the things that first worried NBC's Broadcast Standards Committee (who also scrutinised the pilot for violence and bad language); in the US minority groups can bring complaints if they're unfairly represented, and non-white criminals are a touchy subject on TV. *Hill Street* has avoided most accusations of racialism by weaving its multi-ethnic cast through complicated narratives which demand multiple points of view and resist stereotyped readings. In 1981 Todd Gitlin wrote:

*This is a show which knows that race and class tear this society apart, that behaving decently under these conditions is an everyday trial, and that there are no blindingly obvious solutions for the accumulated miseries of the ghetto.*<sup>23</sup>

Former executive producer Steve Bochco has said that Furillo 'understands he's not going to solve crime up there. He negotiates survival on the hill.'<sup>24</sup> But survival for whom?

Bochco was saying this back in the days when every morning roll-call ended with Sergeant Esterhaus's gentle injunction 'Let's roll and let's be careful out there.' But when the actor (Michael Conrad) died, Esterhaus was replaced by a bulldog of a sergeant from another precinct, who ritually ends his briefing with 'Let's go out there and do it to them before they do it to us.' Viewers who took this as symptomatic of an ideological jump rightwards, from the politics of tolerance to those of repression, were scarcely

<sup>21</sup>John Naughton, *The Listener*, April 4, 1985.

<sup>22</sup>Mike Davis, letter to *New Socialist*, February 1985, p. 46.

<sup>23</sup>Todd Gitlin, 'Make It Look Messy', *American Film*, September 1981, p. 46.

<sup>24</sup>quoted in *ibid.*

mollified by Sergeant Jablonski's reply when Patsy objected to this tag, to the effect that all he means is that they should engage in preventive policing. Lieutenant Goldblume, the principal spokesman for liberal points of view – on capital punishment, for example – was recently domesticated by an affair with the libidinous widow of a gangster. When Joyce Davenport took a job as public prosecutor (which meant she was now on the same side as the other law enforcers), there was less dialectic play over issues like the rights of the accused. Davenport later returned to the defence, but *Hill Street* is still in the grip of a neo-conservative winter, and it's not much comfort to suspect that the producers are perfectly conscious of the direction in which they're steering this cult.

With the breakdown of the liberal consensus of '60s America, and the rise of the New Right, liberalism has moved from a hegemonic to an oppositional ideology. In terms of television, the issue-oriented *Lou Grant* (partially inspired by the 1976 Watergate film *All the President's Men*) was probably liberalism's last hurrah. By the time it was created, that ideology was on the defensive, and its treatment of topical issues – nuclear war, rape, industrial pollution – was inclined to adopt the preachy tone of what

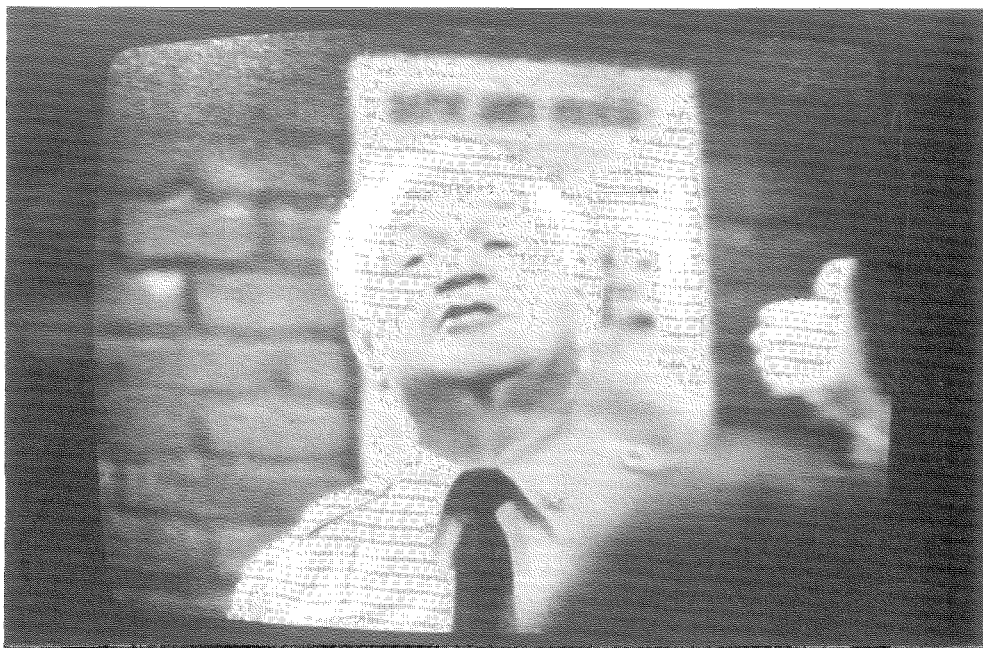
was by then termed a 'bleeding heart liberal', as Alan Burns admitted in *Cat Among Lions*. MTM's fights with CBS over *Lou Grant* seem to have taught the company that in the current broadcasting climate direct coverage of issues wasn't on. The publicity material for *Hill Street* is riddled with statements like 'We're not big champions of causes; we're big champions of emotional causes' (actor Bruce Weitz)<sup>25</sup>, or 'our point of view is the personal lives of the cops' (Bochco)<sup>26</sup>. Even actor Ed Asner, the most politically upfront of those associated with MTM, maintained that *Lou Grant* simply dealt with the humanistic aspects of social problems.

In *Inside Primetime*, Todd Gitlin describes *Hill Street Blues* as expressing a middle-class ideology 'turned in on itself, at a loss for direction'<sup>27</sup> and in fact veering toward neo-conservatism in its depiction of a beleaguered band running a holding operation against the forces of chaos. Even the series' representation of the wider context of the

<sup>25</sup>Bruce Weitz quoted by Polly Pattullo, 'Hill Street News', *The Observer Magazine*, November 4, 1984, pp 98, 100-101.

<sup>26</sup>Steve Bochco quoted in *Cat Among Lions*, Channel Four, December 10, 1984.

<sup>27</sup>Todd Gitlin, *Inside Primetime*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1983.



Right turn? Sergeant Jablonski recommends doing 'it to them before they do it to us'.

state's repressive forces – the lawyers, social workers and politicians who recur as secondary characters – while unique to the genre on either side of the Atlantic, can be read (and have been) as populism of the right or the left. Liberalism seems to have been shipped back to the more congenial climate of the Boston hospital in *St. Elsewhere*.

MTM's treatment of social problems as individual cases recalls the discourse of quality cinema analysed by Ellis. But in a country where the documentary tradition is very marginalised, social problems are usually narrativised as melodrama in popular fictions, and MTM is different largely because of the stylised complexity of that melodrama. *Hill Street Blues* offers so many points of view that it is difficult to police, as Kerr puts it (p 151), in terms of broadcasting's codes of balance. Bochco often boasted that 'we are an Equal Opportunities Offender'.<sup>28</sup> Caren Demming concludes her paper by celebrating the openness of its aestheticised melodrama:

*The form's concern with the urgency of restoring order out of chaos and its recognition of the impossibility of doing so except in personal terms permeate the Hill Street Blues narrative formally and thematically. Thus, viewers are free to interpret variously the meanings characters assign to specific events. More importantly viewers can accept the ultimate meanings of the form, and the seriousness of the issues it addresses, even when presented with content that otherwise might be offensive on aesthetic, moral, or political grounds. In its refusal to answer melodrama's big question and its deliberate obfuscation of answers to even the little questions, Hill Street Blues declares its preoccupation with the search.*<sup>29</sup>

I would argue that even in its later series, *HSB*, in narrativising moral issues as a hermeneutic game, remains consistent with liberalism insistence on social equality and the dictates of the individual conscience.

The episode transmitted on Channel 4 on April 20, 1985 ('The Life and Times of Dominic Florio, Junior'), for example, contained five stories, one of which addressed the issue of abortion, but across a plot so complicated and

garnished with so many points of view that it would be difficult to say where the writers or producers stood on the issue. In a scuffle outside a family planning clinic, a right-to-life campaigner accidentally knocks down a woman five months pregnant, who miscarries as a result. Joyce Davenport wants to arraign him for attempted murder, it is implied, partly because of her anger and inability to bear a child herself; the new public defender (also a woman) wants the conscience-stricken man to plead not guilty on the grounds that the foetus was not viable, making a mockery of his right-to-life principles. Sergeant Bates, who has been caring for the injured woman, is given a long speech in a scene set in a bar patronised by the regulars. The camera tracks back to show her speaking to her partner Joe:

*I mean, you know what's growing inside you, and they're going to tell you what it means? You gotta listen to eighty different people and none of them know the feeling you got in your belly. They're going to tell you what it means? You know what it means. You know what you're doing. You know what you did. And you know what's gone. Then you gotta forgive yourself. And you forgive yourself because you gotta go on. And that's all there is to it.*

The strangled voice of liberal conscience affirming the woman's right to choose doesn't have the last word, but Lucy's subjectivism seems to be confirmed by a cut to the coda scene in which Joyce and Frank reflect that it's impossible for an outsider to understand personal tragedy. Furthermore, aesthetic properties combine to privilege Lucy Bates' discourse over its rivals: its position in the episode, its after-hours location, its duration, and actress Betty White's performance, as well as the character's structural role within the series.

## CONCLUSION

The contributors to *MTM: 'Quality Television'* (and the makers of *Cat Among Lions*) have raised the standard of television criticism, but their impact on TV studies is more doubtful since they do not theoretically ground their evaluations. On the whole, they deploy terms like those I have mentioned – quality, self-reflexivity and liberalism – which by implication

<sup>28</sup>Steve Bochco, quoted in Kerr, 'The Beat Goes On', op cit, p 151.

<sup>29</sup>Caren Demming, op cit, pp 43-44.



'You know what you're doing': Sergeant Bates defends the woman's right to choose.

make MTM series not just more interesting for critics, but 'better' for audiences on both sides of the Atlantic. Yet apart from providing an account of quality in industrial terms (the pursuit of a more affluent audience), they do not really elaborate those critical terms. They shouldn't have been so bashful. After all, questions of value sneak into the most rigorous formalist discourses on film and television.

But the uncoordinated writing team on the MTM project end up crediting too much to the stated intentions of a handful of visible MTM spokespersons, who seem disarmingly receptive to the attentions of media analysts. The book contains almost no textual analysis of individual episodes, or study of the narrative development of individual series. The audiences are also missing (invariably the case in production studies), and so is any consideration of the circulation practices which mediate MTM series: advertising and publicity campaigns, television journalism and scheduling policies. The ways in which such series are perceived cannot properly be discussed without consideration of larger discursive practices, in particular the evolution of TV genres like situation comedy, police series, and comedy-dramas, both within national boundaries and when exchanged across them.

For example, who does Channel Four think it

is addressing when it describes *Hill Street Blues* in promotional terms like the following?

*Veronica Hamel co-stars as the attractive and determined public defender Joyce Davenport, who challenges Furillo's methods by day—a professional necessity that could add much strain to their new marriage.*<sup>30</sup>

This is an apparent attempt to pull the series into the clearly defined ambit of soap opera. Elsewhere it is promoted as a more realistic depiction of the police than other American cop shows provide. The *TV Times* featured an interview with officers of a North Hollywood precinct, one of whom remarked that it showed 'the irony of life out in the street... also they show how the criminal can beat the system'<sup>31</sup>.

There is no analysis of audience research findings in either the US or UK, or of smaller indices of the series' popular appeal (or lack of it). In this country the *Daily Star* conducted a viewers' poll in the spring of 1984: 76% of respondents loved *Hill Street*, and 12% couldn't

<sup>30</sup>See 4, April 1985, p 20.

<sup>31</sup>Douglas Thompson, 'The Hill? It's Great, Say the Real-Life Cops', *TV Times*, November 3-9, 1984, pp 4-5.





Captain Furillo and councillor Davenport in *Hill Street*'s traditional romantic coda.

stand it.<sup>32</sup> What is the significance of this polarisation? Are British viewers as likely as Americans to accept, because of the overarching melodramatic narrative and stylistic 'difference' of the series, meanings which in other forms they might reject? What are the pleasures of the 'difficult' text for the two to four million British viewers?

It might be instructive to know why other quality series from MTM have failed in the US. If the ensemble formula – the depiction of a band of professionals under pressure – is so successful, why have some recent ones failed, like *Bay City Blues* (focusing on a baseball team) or *The Duck Factory* (set in an animation studio)? Why did British television eventually network the police

and hospital versions and not the ghetto high school one (*The White Shadow*)? What are the structural differences between *Hill Street Blues* and *St. Elsewhere* that might explain the latter's relative failure on British television? And finally, what features of quality television carry over into the output of other production companies working in the same industrial conjuncture, often employing personnel who are MTM alumni?

Nevertheless, the key issue raised on the margin of the MTM phenomenon – the relation between ideologies and aesthetics, between the progressive and the pleasureable – looks set to make a comeback.

<sup>32</sup>'Your Hill Street Heroes', *The Daily Star*, June 9, 1984, p 12.

I would like to thank John Clarke and Michael O'Shaughnessy for their advice on an earlier draft of this article.

# DISCOURSE/TALK/ TELEVISION

ROBERT H DEMING  
REPLIES TO  
MARGARET MORSE

One of the major problems with Margaret Morse's recent article 'Talk, Talk, Talk'<sup>1</sup> is that she under-theorises both television and 'talk'. She views the varieties of television talk—in news, sports, talk shows and advertising—as though they are language, suitable for semiotic though not linguistic analysis. She discusses 'talk' and ignores its accompanying visualisation. She makes television talk value-free, a discourse of spatial representation, and concludes that it is a 'fictional discourse'. Television talk is 'discourse and the self-referential reality of human dialogue'.<sup>2</sup> Using Benveniste's definition of discourse, where every utterance assumes a speaker and a hearer, an 'I' and a 'you', she moves from a definition of 'talk' as language to a definition of talk as discourse and dialogue, as utterance, as enunciative situation. She offers something else which is not that kind of discourse, which is television as a new mode of discourse, the fiction of discourse.

Since television talk cannot partake, she believes, of the same realism as the novel, cinema, or theatre, its discourse cannot be that of 'story', but must be that other plane of language and of subjectivity, discourse, which calls for inter-subjective relations with a 'you'.<sup>3</sup> But the enunciative subjectivity of television 'talk' can be only that of 'quasi-subjects', and the discourse of that subjectivity can only be 'imaginary', offering viewers not inter-subjectivity but 'the impression of discourse'. Somehow, television talk as a

socio-economic technology with an apparatus that is historical and ideological, and as a heterogeneous discursive construct is reduced to an 'act of enunciation'—of transmission and reception (although that is untheorised)—and an 'utterance' which is addressed to 'us' personally and directly as a 'you' (which disappears from Morse's argument at this point) from the enunciative 'quasi-subject'.

Morse is, however, accurate in the broad outlines of her argument: talk formats on television are constructed and mediated discourses which are made to appear to represent the 'real' and are usually accepted as such. That they are basically fictional has less to do with the discourse of television's talk than with television itself. But Morse does not focus upon those relations that exist between modes of television

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<sup>1</sup> *Screen* March-April 1985, vol 26 no 2, pp 2-15.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*, p 2.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*, p 3. Part of Morse's definition of 'discourse' is puzzling: 'its basic tense is the present or "the time at which one is speaking"' derived from Emile Benveniste, 'Subjectivity in Language', in *Problems in General Linguistics*, Coral Gables, University of Miami, 1971, p 222, quoted by Morse, p 2. While news discourse is meant to be in the 'present', the flow of stories on any given evening may contain past and future stories as well, follow-up stories from previous evenings, teasers for future stories (as well as for other programmes on that particular network). I find it strange that Morse would attempt to theorise discourse space, but not discourse time for each of the four 'talk' formats that she describes.



'talk' production and the ideological choices of both 'talk' and image that make those modes of production appear 'natural', 'universal', and 'inevitable'. Her emphasis upon talk as a specific signifying practice, and therefore upon television as a work of production of meanings and effects, assumes that viewers/listeners are always positioned by and in the kinds of construction of 'talk's' address that she documents. What is missing is any awareness that such total textual effectivity ignores the many ways in which viewers are always already positioned by other televisual discourses, by extra-televisual discourses, and by the fictiveness of television's discourse in general. She seems unaware of what is now a very established and credible challenge to the notion of a single text's effectivity represented by, at least, the work of the Glasgow University Media Group, David Morley's work on *Nationwide*, or even Steve Neale's statement that mode of address is not 'synonymous with textual address' and that the 'positions of knowledge inscribed in the textual operations [as] obligatory for all readers' are still problematic.<sup>4</sup>

The main argument describing this new 'mode of fiction' is set out in Part Two of the article; Part One theorises the discursive form of the television message as 'utterance'. Morse investigates the spatial relations between the enunciate 'I' and 'you', what she labels 'discourse space', by contrasting the specific differences in the construction of discourse space and story space, using, predictably, the cinema-television contrast. She first describes the three different looks associated with the cinema: the look of the camera (at the profilmic), the look of the spectator (at the film projected on the screen), and the intradiegetic look of each character within the film (at other characters, etc). These 'looks' supposedly provide for the interplay of multiple identifications whereby the subject identifies with the look and thereby with him/herself as 'looker'.

Narrative cinema, Morse says following Mulvey, denies the first two looks, subordinating them to the third. Television acknowledges the three looks by including one or more narrators and the act of narration in the representation of a news-story. The narrator's direct look (at the viewer) is the 'prime constituent of discourse space, establishing an implied narratee, a relation between actually "empty" subject positions.<sup>5</sup>

'The subject-narrator of television is "confessional", holding a one-way conversation, calling forth an addressee who never becomes an "I" except in the vague and inclusive form of "we"...' It is the narrator's 'imaginary discourse' which seems pivotal to Morse's argument for a 'fiction of discourse.' But Morse does not acknowledge the work of the Glasgow University Media Group<sup>7</sup> in documenting the means by which news presenters/anchors/narrators consistently work for their own and the news broadcasts' credibility, reliability, and objectivity by reinforcement of the 'naturalness' of their word choices, patter, chit-chat, and presentation of the ways in which news-stories are, themselves, the constructed results of professional and ideological codes that serve the same 'natural' presentational mode.<sup>8</sup> That 'we' accept unquestioningly (and wrongly) the narrators of news, the acts of narration, and the representations of real-world events as though they are 'real', a transparency of television which transcends Morse's notions of discourse space, is widely accepted.

Only in televisual discourse is the direct look of the person within the discourse allowed to be directed toward those who are watching. This is a characteristic practice of news, talk show hosts, and advertisements. Unlike advertisements, however, news displays a hierarchy of persons who have different access to the mode of direct address: only certain individuals speak directly and these must be perceived as politically 'neutral' persons though, given their place in the

<sup>4</sup> Steve Neale, 'Propaganda', *Screen* Autumn 1977, vol 18 no 3, pp 18, 34.

<sup>5</sup> Margaret Morse, op cit, p 5.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> In *Bad News*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976; *More Bad News*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980; and *Really Bad News*, London, Writers and Readers, 1982.

<sup>8</sup> Little attention has been given to the transformations of the 'real world' that news professionals make; that is the specific means by which [1] a 'real world' event is transformed, constructed, and produced as [2] a 'real event', then as [3] an 'occurrence', then [4] an 'event' and finally as [5] a 'news-story' through the professional/craft hierarchy of news production practices. These practices are the transparent working practices of those who, consciously or unconsciously, make choices of codes, conventions and sets of symbols which are ideological – in most cases what will 'work' as comprehensible to most people and, simultaneously, satisfy the professional work hierarchy.

discourse, they are politically powerful. And the politically powerful outside televisual discourse also have access to the mode of direct address. All others are usually denied such direct address, usually being interviewed in three-quarter shot, with shot/reverse shot validation that the interviewee is speaking, not to the audience, but to an always attentive reporter, who is our surrogate.

The 'direct look' of the news narrator does not, moreover, guarantee that the 'implied narratee' accepts, rejects, or negotiates that look in any way. If the narrator's space is 'empty' as a subject position, as Morse claims, the social-historical-ideological subject-spectator's position is far from empty. The more we learn, from the Glasgow Group and others, about the ideological construction of the news and other 'talk' formats, the more our common sense viewing of the news on a regular basis shows us, and the more our mediated universe of televisual discourse provides by way of information about the 'news', the less like 'reality' and the more like 'fiction' the news becomes. The practical discourses in which we, as social and historical formations, are immersed sometimes allow the news to function as Morse sees it, as a 'fiction of discourse', sometimes not.

While the look of the news camera at the proflmic is still problematic for many, and while the look of the spectator at news discourse is also problematic, there is still another 'look' which, for some reason, Morse chooses not to mention. That is Paul Willemen's notion of the 'fourth look,' which creates the possibility that the viewer may be 'overlooked in the act of looking'. It is the fourth look which 'introduces the social into the very activity of looking'. The fourth look is a form of direct address to the viewer, an 'articulation of the viewer . . .'.<sup>9</sup> Willemen notes that the fourth look, direct address, is characteristic of pornography ('This is for you to look at') and is a form of censorship. Television news is also a form of censorship because it is a determination of what can be shown. The televisual spectator is engaged in the fourth look most of the time, for television offers its viewers a variety of forms of address and provides opportunities for viewers to engage with the possibility of direct address, with a partial direct address, and with an oblique direct address (in the disembodied voice-over).<sup>10</sup> Indeed, television

talk programmes require such a viewer, one whose familiarity with the schedule of specific 'day-parts' needs constant reinforcement, one whose ability to shift positions within television's heterogeneity is required, one whose 'looks' must be called by the overly-dominant presence of sound else the visualisation will fail to inform, entertain, or normalise (especially in television news, but in sports and advertising as well).<sup>11</sup>

I think Morse has not made enough of the 'confessional' mode of the subject-narrator, particularly as television news anchors (presenters), professional sportscasters and talk show hosts function as peculiar 'television personalities', whose continual presence is reinforced by a plethora of extra-discursive exposure in the popular press, television magazines (such as the *US TV Guide*), and television specials.<sup>12</sup> News narrators, like their televisual colleagues the sportscasters and talk-show hosts, and even 'television personalities' who appear in commercial advertisements, also exist in spaces other than the discursive ones Morse describes. They exist everywhere in our media environment; they are 'present' with us in many discursive constructs, not just the limited ones Morse investigates. And that 'presence' constructs our 'view' of them, 'naturalises and humanises' them, makes them available on human (one might even say on our own) terms, over-determines their limited roles in 'talk discourses'. It cannot be said, therefore, that they are story-tellers in only one-way conversations with 'us' because they are always 'talking' to us.

I think Morse has not made enough of the way in which the 'discourse spaces' she examines are inserted into different schedules, on different evenings, and in different day-parts and how

<sup>9</sup> Paul Willemen, 'Letter to John', *Screen Summer* 1980, vol 21 no 2, pp 56, 57.

<sup>10</sup> Beverle Houston, 'Viewing Television: The Metapsychology of Endless Consumption', *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* Summer 1984, vol 9 no 3, p 186.

<sup>11</sup> See John Ellis, *Visible Fictions*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982.

<sup>12</sup> See John Langer, 'Television's "Personality System"', *Media, Culture and Society*, October 1981, vol 3 no 4, pp 351-365; two papers delivered by John Fiske at the 1985 Iowa Conference on Television Criticism, 'Cagney & Lacey: Reading Character Structurally and Politically' and 'Television and Popular Culture'; and Tony Bennett, 'The Bond Phenomenon: Theorizing a Popular Hero', *Southern Review* 1983, vol 16 no 2, pp 195-225.

each of these might change the discursive places and positions she investigates. Nor has she said anything about how our viewing position, our 'discourse space', might change if we do our viewing in public rather than private spaces—in airport lounges, in the neighbourhood saloon (where in the US the news can always be eliminated for any of a number of syndicated programmes on our 35 or more channels), on huge wall screens, in rooms in our homes other than the assumed 'living' room. Nor has she said anything about how the discourse spaces she examines are inserted into the discourse spaces which we inhabit, or what our patterns of viewing might be in those different spaces. Nor, finally, has she said how our assumption of the 'liveness' of televisual presentation might change or negotiate the televisual fictional discourse she labours to describe.

I have many fewer objections to Morse's specific descriptions of the respective discourse spaces of television news, sportscasts and talk shows. In general, Morse's textual specificity is admirable. But I think Morse cannot talk about the news anchor's direct address 'uniting the implied discourse space of the viewer's home with the explicit discourse space of the studio.'<sup>13</sup> Unless, that is, she is willing to theorise the spectator-viewer's 'implied discourse space' in ways which will acknowledge that the viewer's discourse space can include a multiplicity of subject positions, the possibility for differential decodings of the anchor's discourse (as well as the news-stories), the political economy of the mode of news production, and, at least, the unannounced and mis-recognised possibility of conflicting 'world views' among those respective discourses.<sup>14</sup>

'I-you' relationships between the viewer and the anchor are not, in short, demanded simply because the mode of direct address can be found in the 'discourse space'. If, finally, a viewer is included among all those who address the camera directly, as well as talk among themselves, 'with a look', does it necessarily follow that the viewer identifies with that 'look' in precisely the way Morse says s/he does? When the mode of analysis is semiotic, that question never arises, but I believe it should and that another mode of analysis should be added to the semiotic else text effectivity is a critical myth.

Television news, sports, talk-shows and

advertisements are not designed to change a viewer's attitudes or values but to reinforce the perception of what is important and what is 'really out there in the world'. News in particular is designed socially, normatively, and ideologically to guide viewers' perceptions of what is 'real' and sometimes *be* 'real' itself. But the 'real' is always grasped through discourse. The viewer/spectator's position in various social formations will shape and determine his/her position in relation to news, sports, talk-show and advertisement discourses.

Robert Stam also raises the issue of direct address, in his effort to correct William Gibson's view that the fundamental aesthetic of television news is naturalistic.<sup>15</sup> If the fundamental aesthetic of television is illusionistic, what can be made of the mode of direct address in news? The illusionistic continuity is 'impracticable in the news', Stam notes, because news and its commercial advertisements could not be further removed from the illusionistic. The news, on the other hand, presents us with the image of a person, the anchor, 'who would seem to be the source of the enunciation, at a close social distance speaking directly to us'.<sup>16</sup> The news-stories do have illusionistic aspects but are not correlated with the political, narrational and discursive power of the direct address segments. But, even the direct address segments are probably fictional (a point of agreement with Morse) because they imply a spontaneity of address, remarks, and a discourse especially formulated for that audience. Stam believes that such a relationship leads, inevitably, to a narcissistic relationship with an imaginary other and, if not received critically, television news is founded on a misrecognition that fosters a kind of confusion of pronouns.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Margaret Morse, *op cit*, p 6.

<sup>14</sup> See my discussion of multiple subject positioning in 'The Television Spectator-Subject', in the Summer 1985 issue of *Journal of Film & Video*.

<sup>15</sup> Robert Stam, 'Television News and Its Spectator', in E Ann Kaplan (ed), *Regarding Television*, American Film Institute Monograph series, vol 2, University Publications of America, 1983, pp 24-43; William Gibson, 'Network News: Elements of a Theory', *Social Text* Fall 1980, vol 1 no 3, pp 88-111.

<sup>16</sup> See Robert Stam, *op cit*, p 38.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid*, p 39.

In other words, the really important questions about television 'talk' forms are not yet answered, in spite of the excellent detail in Morse's description of textual practices. Let me conclude by posing what I see to be the questions that need to be addressed in the hope that this 'response' will engender some needed dialogue: To what extent do the news-stories on television exploit fictional practices (in their ordering, placement, length and relation to each other) and to what extent do they displace fiction? If they are not fictional, not 'story', can they be said to be structured as discourses? Does the fictive nature of the relationship between

anchor and audience (as Morse has established it) displace the fictive nature of the news-stories? Is the concept of a gendered spectator or gendered social audience involved in the modes of address of news, sports, talk-shows and advertisements? For each of Morse's 'talk' categories, is there any ideological privileging associated with the voice and face of the discursive narrators? How are those who 'talk' in Morse's four categories correlated with political, narrational and discursive power? In responding to these questions, I believe we can begin to theorise the 'talk' mode of television and, thereby, further theorise television and its study.

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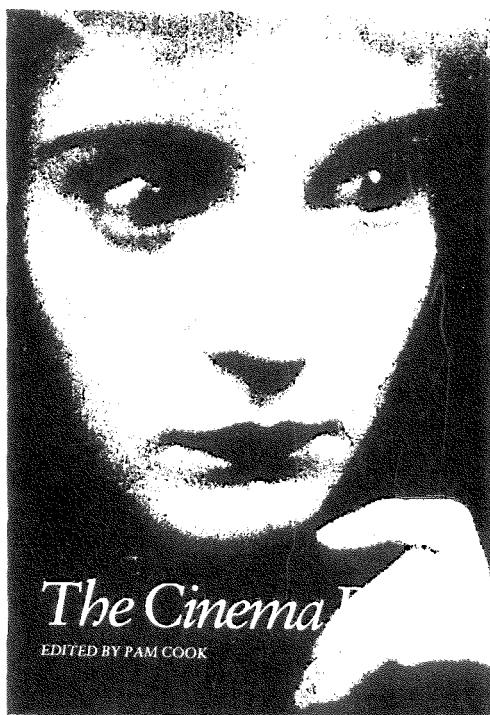
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# LETTERS

**From Edward Johnson, Murgatroyd Street, West Bowling, Bradford, West Yorkshire:**

I particularly enjoyed the last issue of *Screen* (May-August 1985, vol 26 nos 3-4) and above all the article by Rosie Thomas on 'Indian Cinema: Pleasures and Popularity'.

I found her comment on the western world's contempt of popular Indian cinema particularly apt, e.g. 'The most striking aspect of First World discourse on Indian popular cinema must be its arrogant silence'. Indeed this might almost be an understatement. I could give a host of references, but I think two should suffice:

In 1976 I wrote to Ken Wlaschin, then programme director of the National Film Theatre, and suggested a season of popular Indian films (Bombay Talkies) and listed 20 classics, many of which were freely available in the UK with sub-titles. After some prompting, from myself, I received a reply saying that they often had seasons of Indian films and that they had indeed screened almost all those I had listed.

**From Janet Thumim, Kelmscott Road, London SW11:**

Running through Simon Watney's closely argued piece on Andrew Britton's *Katharine Hepburn: the Thirties and After*<sup>1</sup> (*Screen* September/October 1985, vol 26 no 5) is a subtle appropriation of Katharine Hepburn's consistent assertion of autonomy to a discussion of sexual ambiguity. It is not Hepburn's *sexuality* which is ambiguous, rather her *independence* which threatens patriarchal definitions of femininity, and for which she is diegetically punished, as Britton amply demonstrates. By reading this conflict in terms of sexual ambiguity Watney, and I think to a lesser extent Britton too, fails to demonstrate the significance for feminists of the Hepburn 'star-text'<sup>2</sup>. In this way both Watney and Britton, paradoxically, conform to the patriarchal requirement that 'woman' can only be read in relation to male concerns. Women are defined by men. Woman, as-sign or as-person, is always 'other' to the male reader. Their discussions of *Bringing Up Baby* and *Adam's Rib* demonstrate my point:

*Only Hawks' great comedy 'Bringing Up Baby'*

(It is a small point, but his reply took over a year to get to me.) I went to the British Film Institute library and went through every issue of the NFT programme booklet and discovered that in fact only one Bombay Talkie had ever been screened at the NFT... in 1959 the film *Do Ankhen Bara Haath*, directed by Shantaram; it had been on my list, but so were *Mother India*, *Gunga Jumna*, *Pyasa*, *Madhumati*, and *Mughal E Azam*, some of the finest films of world cinema.

Several years later during which I had continued my enthusiasm and research into Bombay cinema and had had articles published on the subject I was, I thought fortunately, accepted at the last minute onto an MA in Film Studies at the University of East Anglia. One important component of the course was a long dissertation on an area of special interest and preferably incorporating new research. Imagine my disgust, therefore, when I was not only insulted for my interest in Indian popular cinema, but prevented from studying it as a part of my MA. One reason I was given was that as the tutors didn't know anything about the subject they couldn't examine it....

*goes all the way with her potential subversiveness...*

*...films which openly articulate the politics of feminism in Hollywood, and it could not be said, I think, that the 70s has produced anything which, in this respect, goes further than 'Adam's Rib'.<sup>3</sup>*

The point here is that two *apparently* radical films, which do give a voice to Hepburn's 'potential subversiveness' and to 'the politics of feminism', do so only in order to ridicule (in *Adam's Rib*) and contain (in *Bringing Up Baby*) these positions, thus diminishing their oppositional power in patriarchal order. To what ends are Hepburn's anarchic skills deployed in *Bringing Up Baby*? To 'getting her man', which she does at the narrative closure, albeit amongst the debris of the painstakingly constructed brontosaurus skeleton, a metaphor for conventional order. She has *no other aim*. Although the spectacle of her subversive activity may be in itself enchanting, we must consider its effective consequences. What is the consequence of Hepburn/Amanda Bonner's feminist polemic in *Adam's Rib*, characterised as it is in contemporary reviews as 'richly absurd'? It is, as far as the diegesis is concerned, Spencer

Tracy/Adam Bonner's last words '*Vive la différence*' spoken as he climbs on to their double bed to join Hepburn/Amanda, drawing the curtains behind him: the last image of the film. For a feminist these are two *deeply* reactionary films since they make a false parade of feminism and in so doing compromise the oppositional nature of the Hepburn persona.

Neither Britton nor Watney seems aware of this fundamental problem, hence my unease with their otherwise often exemplary discussion of the implications of Hepburn's performances, the star system, and sexual politics (to use Watney's classification of Britton's 'three principal areas of theoretical concern'). From the point of view of film theory the discussions of genre, performance and institutional ideologies are invaluable: as a feminist I'm worried about the *use* of feminist positions in the elucidation of these issues. Are we witnessing here yet another form of women's servicing of patriarchy?

Watney's reference to the concepts of latent and manifest content which he claims are implicit in Britton's theoretical stance, while productively emphasising the point of textual analyses also serves to reinforce the 'social and historical vacuum' which (I think) he suggests Britton attempts to avoid. Watney's own position *apropos* this 'vacuum' is hard to determine since his prose is particularly convoluted at this point. The reference to psychoanalytic concepts is problematic in relation to the kind of ideological archaeology which is the project of Britton's book, since by focusing on the internal structure of a film text it tends at worst to ignore, at best to marginalise, the crucial dimension of the film in its ideological work – which is of course the nature of the readings possible to its audience by reference to their own experiential knowledge.

Watney refers succinctly to Britton's suggestion that the star's meaning in any given text 'never entirely present or coherent' is produced through the 'triple articulation' of the person, the persona and the part. Hepburn, according to Watney, 'is seen to "play" at modes of conventional femininity which never adequately fit her, in such a way that the notion of femininity itself is revealed as a series of cultural and economic roles, rather than an inflexible biological donnée'. And 'Britton is admirably sensitive to such examples of "excess" in her acting'. Watney summarises beautifully

here the essential substance of a feminist reading of Hepburn's *performances* facilitated by her *persona*. But the terms 'play' and 'excess' diminish the reading by overemphasising *performance* and *part* and underestimating the function of the Hepburn star-text (the trajectory over time of her persona) in the formation of the reading.

So unless we are to accept the meanings of a film text as existing in some 'social and historical vacuum', we must add a fourth term to this 'triple articulation'. This is the mediation of meaning which occurs in the very process of consumption. This mediation is to some extent observable in contemporary responses to films (to which Britton, rightly, gives more weight than Watney acknowledges in his review) and is also, more importantly, dependent on experiential comparisons made by the audience. This is difficult ground, particularly in respect of historical texts, but reference to David Morley's work<sup>5</sup> and Dorothy Hobson's discussion of TV soap audiences<sup>6</sup> is rewarding here since they both reveal the *activity* of the audience in consumption of a given text.

For feminists the questions so closely addressed by both Britton and Watney are useful: but useful in the service of particular purposes which are not, I think, sufficiently acknowledged in either Britton's book or Watney's review. These are, precisely, to reveal the ways in which patriarchal hegemony is maintained and renewed in popular film *and in the commentaries upon them*.

<sup>1</sup> Tyneside Cinema, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 1984.

<sup>2</sup> 'The film is one text, the star is another text passing through it. The result is a system in which any film is guaranteed to signify over and above its connotations as a textual system'. John Ellis 'Made in Ealing', *Screen* Spring 1975, vol 16 no 1, p 78. Altering Ellis's emphasis, one might say that the star is one text, the film another text passing through it. In the case of Hepburn this is particularly significant, given her refusal to co-operate with many of the agencies typically engaged with the business of constructing star personae.

<sup>3</sup> Both quotations from Andrew Britton's introduction to the December 1984 National Film Theatre programme on its Katharine Hepburn retrospective.

<sup>4</sup> 'In court... they indulge in some wonderful antics... the most richly absurd of these is when the defendant brings on a marvellously assorted team of celebrated women in defence of feminism'. *Woman*, May 22, 1950.

<sup>5</sup> *The 'Nationwide' Audience*, London, British Film Institute, 1980.

<sup>6</sup> *Crossroads: The Drama of a Soap Opera*, London, Methuen, 1982, chapter 6.